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**Empowerment:
Raising our Voices through Social Organization**

By

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Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Introduction	2
Methods	4
Organization Descriptions	8
Results and Conclusions	14
Bibliography	16

Abstract:

This project aims to investigate the strength of organization as a tool of individual empowerment. I plan to look at three different social organizations each of which specialize in working with women. The organizations I choose to look at will have different types of fundamental construction: bottom-up (grass roots), horizontal (the church), and top-down (NGOs). The reason for this is to see how different means of development effect empowerment. Each of the organization will focus on women so there is a common trend between the three groups. This study will attempt to answer the question of whether the union of people in mass in fact empowers the individual, and if so how?

Introduction:

In the ever growing world of development there had been a huge push to generate the empowerment of individuals. Somewhat ironically, one of the primary ways of creating individual empowerment is through the formation of organizations. Because empowerment is a product of organization it is essential to understand organizations themselves. Firstly, why do organizations form? Francois Hainard, who co-wrote with Christine Verschuur and article on women's empowerment, states that organizations are created as a response to problems in development; women are "creative in community management; they maintain social cohesion...they organize themselves in order to upgrade the environment and security" (Hainard 2001:34). Lorraine Bayard de Volo sites in his article on nonmaterial long-term benefits of collective action that "to engage in collective action, people must not only feel aggrieved but also see collective action as a mode of resolving that grievance" (Bayard de Volo 2006:158). Therefore, if we accept then that organizations form as responses to needs within the community we then need to address the topic of membership and participation.

Organizations present an interesting paradox namely because often being a member of a group does not guarantee the gain of concrete material benefits. Actually more times than not the material gains that a member receives are not synonymous with the effort that a member puts into their organization. Bayard de

Volo describes this as the “participation paradox” when the “individual costs of participation seem to exceed the instrumental benefit” (Bayard de Volo 2006:150). Why then do people, usually so driven by profit, continue to participate in organizations? Bayard de Volo answers this question by introducing the concept of “emotional in-process benefits,” or rather intangible, non-material benefits that are a product of group participation (Bayard de Volo 2006:154). The organization creates an emotional support community for the individual which generates a collective group identity. Within this identity the group focus changes from “‘I’ to ‘we’ and members [begin] to recognize themselves in each other” (Bayard de Volo 2006:160). This “we” requires such non-material concepts as “communication, shared understandings and practices, and the recognition of common goals and emotional bonds” (Bayard de Volo 2006:154). Because of these feelings participation, though maybe not materially productive, is pleasurable. One of these non-material benefits are feelings of empowerment.

Empowerment is a difficult term to define. The UN defines empowerment as “giving disadvantaged people better opportunities to do something about their living conditions, and helping them—via counseling, proper training, capacity-building—to understand more clearly the context of their lives and work” (Hainard 2001:45). Whether this is the correct definition or not Bayard de Volo quotes women in his Nicaraguan case study reporting that they participated in the Nicaraguan Widows Group “to develop [themselves] as people and to gain confidence” (Bayard de Volo 2006:162). Though they do not use the word empowerment, one would be hard pressed to deny the synonymous nature of these explanations. Therefore, participation in an organization generates feelings of empowerment which in turn cause individuals to continue being active members of the organization. This empowerment combined with the group feelings of solidarity is what drives the longevity and success of organizations.

The world of development has created subheadings within its conception of organizations. These subheadings appear in the fundamental structure of the organizations and how they are created. The three main subheadings that I have adopted are bottom-up, horizontal, and top-down. Bottom-up implies and movement structured around grassroots or community driven organization. In this

case Hainard states that these types of organizations are the definition of empowerment (Hainard 2001:46). Additionally William Fisher, author of *Doing Good? The Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practices*, points out that such community based organizations have local contact with local problems and thus are more adept at resolving them (Fisher 1997: 444). This is neither a bad or good thing solely a consequence of structural differences, as is the general trend when investigating this fundamental difference. Horizontal organizational structure is one step removed from the community in the sense that the foundation of the group is still part of the community but has strong connections to a greater whole. In the case of this investigation the church suffices as an example of a prominent figure in the community that has a greater connection to network of churches outside the community.

At the other end of the spectrum is top-down structure. This entails an organization which is supported by the influence of a community outsider for example an NGO or government agency. It is in this structure that development takes on a different face and acquires the potential to do more harm than good. Fisher opens his article with a quote from Henry David Thoreau who sates, “if I knew someone was coming over with the expressed intention of doing good, I would flee” (Fisher 1997:439). The main reason for this fear is that one person’s definition of “doing good” may in fact do harm as they might not fully comprehend the situation or the consequences of their actions. Additionally as Fisher notes, “top-down planning, top-down funding, and upward accountability negate participation” which begs the question is that really empowerment (Fisher 1997:455). However on the other hand outside organizations are “useful insofar as they serve as intermediaries that can facilitate [work of local organizations]” and they have the capacity to sustain greater connections on different levels (Fisher 1997: 444). In this way top-down structures are the double edged sword of development.

With this background understanding of organizations and the role they play in individual empowerment, this investigation intends to examine this dynamic under the lens of diverse structures.

Methods:

This project began under the premise of creating contacts with three organizations which were structurally different. In my conception of it entailed researching a “grassroots” group founded by members within the community, a group founded through a group a one step removed from the community such as the church, and thirdly a group directed by an outsider of the community namely and NGO or government organization. These three types of organizations demonstrate certain categories or means of development such as “bottom up,” “horizontal,” and “top down.” However, in constructing this investigation I need some sort of constancy between the three organizations. Understanding that there are numerous types of organizations in the world of development, I choose to focus only on women’s groups. In doing this I forced a general trend into my investigations so that I had something by which to make comparisons. Nonetheless, it was important to clarify that this was not a research project about women’s rights, even though some of the organizations I worked with advocated for women’s rights.

With these parameters in mind I began to select the organizations that I thought would best suit my criteria. Initially, I thought I would work with a local weaving cooperative based in Santa Catarina which was founded Patrona Comez one of our host mothers. This group was to be my example of a grassroots organization. For my “horizontally” structured organization I needed a women’s group founded by the church. Originally, I called Fidel’s contacts at the Saint Lucas Parish as we had visited the building where their women’s group allegedly met. After making this contact I then called Dolores to find out if she knew of any NGOs that worked with women and fit in with my interests in empowerment. It seemed that my investigation was off to a solid start, however looks can be deceiving.

As it turned out the Saint Lucas women’s group was on an undetermined recess as the women didn’t have anything to meet about. In addition Dolores began to seem more and more sceptical about her ability to produce contacts that would meet my criteria. At this point, only my contact with Patrona could be considered a success. Instead I began to look elsewhere within Santa Catarina itself for more women’s groups. To my surprise I found two that fit my needs within the next twenty-four hours. Patrona’s daughter Carolina introduced me to the Pastor of the Evengelica Church who hesitantly gave me permission to work with the women’s

group of the Asamblea de Dios. And Katya's older sister Lidia Cumez informed that she was a member of the first legalized women's group of Santa Catarina: Las Mujeres Mayas. Although this group did not exactly fit my definition of top-down structure I soon learned that they were sustained by outside organizations such as the government and NGOs interests in their projects and efforts. With my focus turned inwards to Santa Catarina I began my investigation in earnest.

I decided to examine at the concept of empowerment through two different levels of perception. First I looked at the institution of the organization, by asking the question to what degree do different types of social organizations empower individuals and how? This question focused on the goals of the organization and how they work as collectives. The second question examined the internal level of an organization and asked how individuals are empowered through their own participation in an organization. I hoped that by observing and interacting with members of these separate groups I would try to measure the success of these organizations through an examination of their structural differences. That is to say, how does a group formed from motivations within the community differ from a group created by a community outsider? With this in mind my goal after three weeks was to be able to answer the above thesis questions and make a conclusion that shows the integral importance of organizations in reference to individual empowerment.

To answer these questions I began meeting with the leaders of the respective organizations to establish an understanding of my project and my perceived relationship with them for the next three weeks. During this time I conducted interviews with these leaders constructed around the following questions:

- How/Why does a group or organization form?
- What are the goals and value of this organization?
- What are the benefits of being part of a/this group or organization? (social, economic, identity)
- To what degree do members gain empowerment?

- Have there been any big changes/accomplishments for your organization
- What were your goals in creating an organization? Were they met?
- Can you define empowerment?
- Do you feel empowered? How and why?
- Does the group give the individual a voice?

The greatest difficulty I encountered was using the word empowerment, as Spanish does not have a direct translation of the word. Instead I was forced to come up with examples of similar words such as *fortalicer*, *infortalecido*, *empoderado*, and *poder personal*. I began each interview with these loose translations and several of my own examples in order to proceed with a relatively clear understanding of empowerment. I learned about the history, purpose, goals, and values of each group and the personal experiences of their leaders. From there, having established my relationship with their leaders, I was introduced to the respective groups. During these group meetings I met active members of the group and conducted participant observations to flesh out my understanding of the groups. This time was also utilized to accustom the group to my presence and develop relationship with some of the members. After coordinating with the leaders I began to conduct interviews with members who either felt comfortable talking with me in Spanish or through a translator. These interviews were based around the following questions:

- Why did you join this organization?
- What are the goals and value of this organization?
- What were your goals in joining an organization? Were they met?
- What are the benefits of being part of a/this group or organization? (social, economic, identity)
- Have there been any big changes/accomplishments as a consequence of joining the organization?
- Can you define empowerment?

- To what degree do members gain empowerment?
- Do you feel empowered? How and why? Is this a change from your experience before joining the group?
- Does the group give the individual a voice?
- Why do you continue to be a member of this group?

Having collected the results of these interviews and observations I began to contemplate my conclusions. As I predicted the structural differences of the organizations played a significant role in the empowerment of their members. In addition I learned several things about non material gains and the power of public service.

Organizations Description:

This section of the paper attempts to describe the three organizations in detail starting including the perspective of their leaders, to how they function, and lastly the perspective of their members.

I. Patrona's Cooperative

Patrona Comez began her weavers cooperative eight years ago because of her reservations with the quality and market of the street. She took matters into her own hands and began choosing women who weavings displayed talent and potential. After talking to the women and giving them a few suggestions, Patrona invested in good quality thread which she then dispersed to six women. These women make up her weavers cooperative and produce works which Patrona then sells in her store. As the *duena* of the organization Patrona takes twenty percent of the sales. However, the women know that they are free to ask for an advance whenever they are in need. Patrona explained that the women work in this group because it gives them power and control over their trade. They know they have a market for their goods in Patrona's store and will get a fair price. She said that these women have a sense of solidarity because their prices are not determined by the tourists but rather by one of their own community members. Patrona has watched

the lives of these six women improve under the common goal of good quality work and fair prices which do not exploit the worker.

Carmen has been working for Patrona for the past six months. She reports that joining Patrona's weaving cooperative has greatly changed her lifestyle. Before she was working full time in one of Santa Catarina's hotels, but now because of Patrona she is able to work half days in the hotel and spend the other half working on her weavings. Carmen started working with Patrona for the security of a monthly pay check and the ability to ask for money when she is in need. She explained to me that "*todo es caro y no sufra si tiene dinero*" and working for Patrona makes her feel like she has a little more control over her own life. She says Patrona's role in all this is to help those in need, making their life a little easier. Additionally as Carmen needs Patrona, Patrona needs Carmen for her weaving skills. For this reason Carmen feels she has a voice that is respected within the group the Patrona has created.

II. *The Women's Group of Asamblea de Dios*

Pedro Salamòn Kiche is the director and pastor of Santa Catarina's Evangelical Church. He explained that the church has groups for everyone because it is difficult when one feels alone in the world. If you are a member of a group then you have a community. Additionally, if you are a group member you work with others to focus on the community; he stated that "*la union hace la fuerza.*" An example he gave was the youth group as their membership is essential because the youth are generally "lost." However, a group allows these youth to look for their identity within a group that is influenced by the church. Because of this church persuaded identity groups are created to include everyone. Pedro also emphasized the when one is part of a group their voice and vote can be heard, especially in relation to the church. The goals of these organizations are to promote this and also solidify the common belief of the church. This is because groups work better when everyone believes in the same thing, which creates unity and a feeling of belonging within the group. However, this unity is hard to obtain and takes time because as Pedro states, "*cada cabeza es un mundo.*"

Rosa has been a member of the evangelical church's women's group for ten years. She explained that this group represents the church in its ability for women to

help those in need. The women the group helps need food and support because they don't have enough income or too many mouths to feed. In these benevolent acts Rosa says her group of women represent the church, she also states that they can do more good united in a group on their own. Another aspect of their unity is their ability to persuade more conversions. United she and her companions have a much stronger voice and are able to convince conversions than if she was alone. This common goal creates a sense of familiarity between members of the group. Also saving someone gives Rosa the power of loving and helping someone in need and the capacity to raise them from their struggles.

Rosa explained that before she joined the church group she couldn't solve her own problems. Now not only can she find a solution to her problems but she can help others with theirs. Rosa attributes this not only to her faith but also to the voice she has gained from being part of a group.

My interview with the church's women's group was very difficult because of the language barrier. Also the format of the meeting was very different than I expected. The women gathered around and tried to understand my questions, when they couldn't understand they asked for help from the father. This is somewhat strange because he does not speak Kaqchikel and he would simply rephrase my questions with a direction more towards the interests of the church. For example, when I asked how the group had influenced their lives, he asked how the church had influenced their lives. In general the responses were yes, unless he called a woman out individually and asked for examples or experiences. Looking at their answers in the influence of the church in their response is apparent and consistent.

The women explained or rather agreed with the father that they come to these meetings to be with people who understand and want to be with God and Jesus Christ. In this group they are able to identify as evangelicals and share a common place of spirituality. The group creates a place for friendships among the women and place to express their voices. Even though they could not articulate it, they did agree that their lives had changed for the better from being a member of the group. They agreed that their role in helping members of the community who are suffering gives them a sense of power in their own lives. These things come when one accepts *dios*.

Following my questions the father read an anecdote from the Bible about two women: Marta and Maria. Marta is very hard working and Maria is too but makes time in her life for God; therefore she is more content with her life. The father's point was that the women of his church need to "*sacar tiempo por jesus*" because "*el tiempo se dedican a dios es tiempo importante.*" In general the meeting seemed to be more of a bible study and a forum for the preacher to lecture the women of his church. Also it seemed to be a time for the group to pray in addition to the time spent during church services. However, I believe it is controversial to have a man leading a women's group, especially one who does all the talking.

III. *Las Mujeres Mayas*

Lidia is the legal representative of Santa Catarina's first legalized women's group the *Asociación de Mujeres Mayas* or ADMMAPA. The group was formed because of the strong feeling that the women of Santa Catarina didn't have a voice or role in the community; essentially they didn't leave their work inside the home. Many of these women didn't understand or believe that women could exist with a united voice and specific role in the community. Now the group works with the Guatemalan government and different outside organizations to complete projects that are needed within the community. Recently, the group became legalized by the municipal so that they can now make greater connections as a recognized and formal organization. This group allows women to share their ideas, vote on group actions, and raise their voices as a representation of community needs. They exist in the solidarity of the same vision and goals.

At first, Lidia did not believe the group would form because their constant requests for legalization were repeatedly denied by the government. In addition Lidia said she felt a very heavy cargo when she was appointed the legal authority of the group with little to no experience. She could not fathom how to organize such a mass of people. But, the women were persistent and found unity in their desires to be heard. In this way they gained the attention and recognition of the municipality.

During the organization's creation the *directive* decided among them to make their conception of an official women's group a reality. They went about this by making phone calls and house visits to the women of Santa Catarina to see if there

was interest. In general the community responded positively; however, there was a slight conflict between this proposed legal group and an unofficial women's group that already existed. In the end this tension still exists and it is difficult because both groups are working towards similar goals. However, the contacts that the *directiva* made during their first years are still very supportive and helpful today.

Though the *directiva* chooses the projects which the group will participate in, their decisions are guided by the voices of the individual group members. One of the organization's great triumphs is that it has created a space where one can voice her needs and discover a solution with the support of others. Additionally, the group gives women a forum where they can enjoy themselves socially.

However, the creation of such an organization does not come without difficulties. Generally the group votes needed projects and creates a solid outline of execution for the institutions who accept the project. But, some institutions will not accept the group or will want to modify the proposal to fit their own vision of what the community may or may not need. It's difficult to negotiate with these outside organizations as ADMMAPA needs their support and funding. One such example of these difficulties is the recent troubles with the thread project. ADMMAPA decided by vote that the majority of the women in Santa Catarina needed thread to continue their weavings. They presented the project to the government and it was approved by the First Lady. However, after the group had honoured the First Lady and prepared to receive the thread they encountered confusion within the system. The thread went to the wrong women's group. In response the group sent the *directiva* to Guatemala City to present their case to the First Lady in the hopes of some resolution. The *directiva* was told that such is the process of bureaucracy and that nothing could be done. Lidia says that these are the continual frustrations that the group faces and while it is unacceptable it is the reality.

I had the opportunity to engage in a dialog about the importance of a women's group. One thematic response was that women are constantly exploited and as a consequence suffer the injustices of gender. Because of these two issues the creation of a women's group is essential in order to provide a community and support system for women so their voices can be heard. The first factor in forming a group is placing an importance in the creation of a "safe place" where women

experience confidence and respect in their relations with other group members. From this first stepping stone a group can begin to grow and move towards community action, but the feeling of *confianza* is essential.

The role of a leader is also an important factor in the creation of a group. Lidia explained that it is important to understand that they are all types of women: quite, loud, shy, talkative, aggressive, and passive. With all these different characters it is essential to present the same personage to each one in order to be a consistent leader. She says you can never let someone come over you; a difficult thing as you are working to empower the individual. It is a very fine line that a leader walks between her relationships she creates and her role as a leader.

Sandra, the youngest member of the *directiva*, likes the cargo of her position. She says it gives her the ability to actually carry out her desires to help the community. Before she was a voice without an audience and didn't have the power of an organization behind her, nor her role as a community leader. Now she has a new found independence.

The following is an excerpt from my observations of a group meeting held on February 19th:

Women sat in quite in a barren school room waiting for the meeting to start. Most had brought their children of varying ages along and one little girl sate with her feet dangling over the edge of her chair, her sombre face a mirror image of the older women around her. She looked very old for her four years and smiled knowingly at me. Soon voices began to echo outside the silent room, and the only boy jerked his nodding head while his mother muttered threats at the back of it. During this time a sporadic stream of women have been trickling into the room so that their number has grown to something close to thirty...As the meeting concluded the *directiva* began to take down names for the event. Room had begun to reverberate with the chatter and laughter of. Women are teasing and joking with each other. It is clear that the women have enjoyed the social dynamic that the meeting offers.

Alma, one of the voices that I heard during the meeting, has been on the peripheries of Santa Catarina's organizations for the past nine years. However, when the first women's group became official she really began to take an active

participatory role. Alma joined the group because she realized that in her cultures women do not leave the house. Instead these women spend their lives inside four walls cooking, doing laundry, and raising children. These women don't learn or experience the outside world. Alma didn't want this; specifically she didn't want to be like her mother, who admits that she was kept in the house by her husband and never did anything with her life. In contrast Alma learned Spanish and began to engage in the outside world through her participation in the group. Inside the house there did not exist opportunity, now being a member of a women's organization she knows, understands, and can articulate her rights.

Alma explained to me that that she feels sad having spend so many years not knowing she had a voice for her needs. Being part of the group has given her an environment of solidarity amongst women who have become her peers. These women place value in their lives outside of the house and thus escape the generation of their parents. The organization gives Alma a family and opportunities to learn outside of her house and pueblo. Also the meetings offer a place to converse and pass along the understanding that she has gained to others. Alma now has a voice which the *directiva* listens to and a forum where there exists a mutual understanding of womanhood. She no longer is afraid to express herself nor is she afraid of meant. She has gained a voice that her husband respects and listens to. For example, she explained to her husband the importance of her meetings even if they occurred during meal times. Tom compensate for this she taught him how to make scrambled eggs, which even he admitted taste good. Now, as she continues her participation in the group her new goal is to change the expectations for women that have become the norm, so that her daughter can have every opportunity available to her.

Results & Conclusions:

My hope for this investigation was to discover results akin to those that the authors of the above articles found. Namely, that participation in an organization generates feelings of empowerment which in turn cause individuals to continue being active members of the organization. In addition I wanted to prove that these feelings of solidarity which drive such organizations are more important than the

physical gains that being a member of an organization might bring. For example, working as part of a weaving cooperative might or might not be generating a financial service to an individual. However, the social gains that are created by that participating in an organization are found to be more valuable.

Through my interviews and observations I did discover a general feeling of empowerment held by all the women with whom I had the opportunity to talk. Generally, they could not articulate these feelings by calling them empowerment as that word was foreign to them; yet they were able to convey these feelings to me by describing their experiences. Much like the articulation that Bayard de Volo received during an interview with a Nicaraguan woman who stated, “being organized is a beautiful thing because you have support...You meet people, interact with them, making friends. And if you aren’t organized, this doesn’t happen because you don’t leave the house, don’t meet people,” I felt that the women I interviewed voiced similar opinions (Bayard de Volo 2006:161). Their participation in their respective groups gave each of them a voice that before had been hidden from them and a forum where they could freely express it.

One factor that I had not anticipated which members from all three organizations articulated was the concept of public service. The idea of helping others played a prominent role in the feelings of empowerment that the women experienced. For example Patrona took pleasure in knowing she was helping the women who worked for her. In contrast Carmen felt a sense of power knowing she was helping Patrona continue the vision of her business. Much of the church’s work was based on helping those in need. Rosa was able to articulate that when she helped someone in need she felt a sense of power in the most basic sense because it meant she was in a place where she could give help; her problems were smaller than those in need. Las Mujeres Mayas is built on the concept of helping women find their voice in their own community. One way of doing this is creating and participating in projects that help others. By doing service these women discover that they can offer even the smallest amount of solidarity to others in need. As Bayard de Volo explains by means of her observations of the Nicaraguan women’s group, “addressing the problems of others and looking for way to improve their work raised many women’s own self-esteem. Thus, these women felt a sense of self-

fulfillment through participation in a communal response to problems...[and the] collective identity and the self-realization and discovery that they entailed” (Bayard de Volo 2006:162). Bayard de Volo’s explanation makes sense and is irrefutable in response of the women with whom I talked.

In addition to these discoveries, I hoped to be able to see difference between organizations that were founded from dissimilar perspectives. I thought that an organization that is created from the “bottom up” would be more successful in fulfilling the goals of the people who found it as they are members of the community. On the other hand, I thought that an organization created from the “top down” would have more power as they have connections outside of the community. But, I felt that such a strategy could allow for the outside organizer too get caught up in their own agenda and not truly see the desire of the people much like Fisher’s article implies. If this proved to be true I think there is great potential for members of this type of organization to feel less empowerment than from those who start their own organization.

In reviewing my field notes it became apparent the difference between the groups’ structures played a pivotal role in empowerment the women felt. For example Patrona talked about her cooperative with utter confidence as it was her own creation and depended solely on her. On the other hand, Las Mujeres Mayas although they were found by a grassroots movement from within the community only exist through the interests of outside organizations. As the disastrous thread project proved, the initiation of their group actions are essential in another’s hands. Though the women feel empowerment because of their membership in the group, they are frustrated by the system which sustains them and also depended on it. This catch twenty-two is not want that raises one’s feelings of empowerment but rather reveals how certain things are out of their control.

Additionally, it became evident the difference between the groups’ structures played a fundamental role in the non-material benefits that the women received. In terms of Patrona’s cooperative her organization offered her workers the feelings of job security and a sure income. These feelings of security are essential in order to feel a sense of self dignity and power. The women’s group of Asamblea de Dios offered each member a sense of solidarity in their faith. The feeling of

community created by this group in their union of beliefs caused each woman to feel a sense of belonging, also a crucial element to empowerment. In a similar vein Las Mujeres Mayas offer a forum where women can gather to social and share their ideas. This space that the *directiva* has created is indispensable to the success of their group and their work towards liberating the women's voices of Santa Catarina.

In general I am thrilled with how my project panned out. Though I struggled with language barriers and concepts I feel strongly that along with my anticipated results I learned about many aspects of community organization that I had not before considered. In this way I feel my investigation was a success.

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