Foundational Awareness:
Fraternal, Religious, and Familial Support Networks in the Lives of Single Mothers in Santa Catarina Palopó
Abstract:
Single parents live inherently without the support of a partner. Yet in Santa Catarina Palopó, Guatemala, single mothers are not only managing to survive the poverty rampant around them but are in fact rising above it. Looking at the plight of the single mother through the life story of one Maria, this paper attempts to delineate the various support networks such mothers rely on, focusing in on three categories: Fraternal, Religious, and Familial. Throughout her life, Maria has at times heavily relied upon and rejected combinations of these three networks, forming an eventual foundation of support on which to raise her own family. However, each network fills a different role, with some much more effective than others. This paper discusses each network’s effect on the lives of several single mothers in Santa Catarina, coming to conclusions regarding the importance of each in forming such a basis for relative economic stability.

Introduction:
I guess asking women if they are single is a pretty universal come-on throughout the world. I was a week into my fieldwork in Santa Catarina Palopó, a Kaqchikel-speaking, rural, indigenous village on the banks of Lake Atitlan, and I was looking for more people to interview. Specifically, I was looking for single mothers. Displaying my keen anthropological sensitivity, I went for the direct approach: turning to the nearest woman, I asked bluntly whether she was single. Full of the confidence of half-fluent Spanish, I was sure I was about to find a hidden pocket of hard-working, single mothers ready to divulge their entire life’s struggles. Instead, and to my horror, I was greeted with a chorus of laughter that rose not only from the forty-year-old, married mother in question, but the fifty-odd people gathered around. I had just asked if this woman was single. I was a twenty-year-old gringo, she a mother of four and an established member of the community. And I had just about asked her out on a date.

Such was the vision of fieldwork in Santa Catarina. Despite the tone of this vignette, through three weeks of study I was able to piece together the economic, social, familial, and religious history of one single mother, tie her story to other similar cases in town, and draw conclusions on the economic hardships and support networks available for single mothers in a community geared towards lives of partnership rather than independence. This paper attempts to bring her story to life, and through it investigate sub-communities, labeled support networks,
found within Santa Catarina. These support networks enable single mothers to function economically, and I argue that without them life as a single mother would be impossible. These communities—which have been studied on their own but not in relation to single mothers—consist of religious establishments, extended family networks, and an amalgam of friends and neighbors.

Support networks are not an unstudied phenomenon. A study done in the 1980’s in the United States compares the effectiveness of kinship networks for single mothers through the lens of race. Their findings gave “empirical evidence that confirms the existence of support networks for mothers” in the United States, with a higher rate of use for single mothers (Hogan et al 1990: 810). The support networks this study focused on were kin relationships and financial aid from a source other than a husband—for single mothers, kin or friends. These, along with the Evangelical Church, are the support networks studied here in rural Guatemala. According to another study based in Guatemala, “single mothers are more likely to live in an extended family…and be engaged in remunerated jobs, all of which safeguard them from severe poverty and compensate for the lack of a male partner's income” (Ishida 2010: 572).

Both these studies skirt the issues I am investigating, namely the three support networks I label Fraternal (friends and acquaintances), Religious, and Familial. The lacuna this study fills in the literature is the question of how such support networks affect the economic well-being of single mothers in rural Guatemala, and how effective each of the three are in providing a foundation for growth.

This particular case study focuses in on one individual and her story, using the experiences of other single mothers to gain a broader perspective. Her name is Maria, and she has been a single mother for twenty years. Her tale of abuse, poverty, hard work, and religion highlights the primary struggles of single mothers in Santa Catarina. Her approach to economic issues and her new-found success in the business realm indicate how it is possible to not only
survive but thrive as a single mother of four in an already poor town in an incredibly poor
country. If nothing else, may the reader take away from this investigation a sense of her
incredible strength and resolve in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. As she would
say, laughing while she washes dishes in the pale light of dawn, “¿La vida es difícil, no?”
(Maria, Field notes Feb 21st 2014)

Methods:

The primary material for this essay came from informal interviews with Maria, usually
over a meal or work. These interviews took place over the span of one month in Santa Catarina
Palopó in 2014: one week in January from the 8th to the 15th, and the three weeks of the 12th
of February to the 6th of March. I observed, watched, recorded, and listened to all the goings on
about the house: the daily struggles washing dishes and clothes, chopping firewood, and taking
out the trash. I followed as best I could the conversations between family members in
kaqchikel. I participated in household chores and worked in Maria’s store preparing homemade
snacks and fetching chips and soda for customers. I attended the Evangelical Church Assemblea
de Dios and its women’s meetings. I went up the mountain in search of firewood, volunteered
for the church, and visited the alcalde, or town mayor, with Maria.

Outside of family-related fieldwork, I conducted two formal interviews of the single
mothers Lucita and Petrona. Because these interviews were short and cursory I also worked in
their houses to talk more openly about their struggles and support networks. Material evidence
of their disparate wealth combined with brief glimpses into family relations provided key
insights into the support networks therein.

I encountered very few problems during fieldwork. The only major issue I faced was
integrating myself into the lives of other single mothers. However, as the project grew and
became a case study focusing of support networks found in the Evangelical Church and the
family, the two interviews and work sessions I conducted became essential, and I feel that I
gained enough insights to extrapolate out without having made an exhaustive study of all the
single mothers in Santa Catarina. Three weeks isn’t nearly enough time for that kind of
investigation.

All quotes from interviews I translated from Spanish. Some of Lucita’s conversations
were translated from Kaqchikel by Maria.

The Monomythic Tale: Maria’s Life and Transformation

Humble Beginnings: Early Life and The Faint Shadows of Support Networks

We’re sitting in Maria’s brand new store in the school. The walls are lined with goods.
The rectangular room is split lengthwise by a wooden counter piled high with candy. Her
brother Juan is busy lifting heavy iron windows to let in the afternoon light while Maria and I
chop up fruit, filling plastic bags to sell. While preparing for the flood of students, we talk
about her experiences growing up poor in Santa Catarina.

Maria was born on May 25th, 1973. Her father Fidel had left her mother Rosa for
another woman five months before, leaving behind two kids and a third on the way. Fidel was
Rosa’s second partner; her first died when their son Adolfo was young. Her other son Juan was
five when Maria was born. The situation could not have been more bleak for the family. She
had to provide food, shelter, and clothing for her kids, who were too young to do any real work.
Yet they persisted on. She regularly attended church at the Evangelical Assemblea de Dios, the
same church that, years later, Maria would turn to in her own time of need. That community
provided her with the emotional and social support a single mother in her position needed. She
worked incredibly hard: “Mi mama sufrió mucho,” Maria repeated over and over again (Maria,
Field notes Jan 11th 2014). Rosa worked as a vender of traje, the traditional clothing worn in
Santa Catarina and other indigenous villages, and primarily targeted tourists. Work had her
traveling from Santa Catarina to Antigua and Guatemala City at times, often bringing along the young Maria to help sell wares and attract tourists. It is difficult as a single parent to maintain a job outside of the house when the tasks of housework—cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, and chopping firewood—typically consume much of the wife’s time in a two-parent household. The literature discusses alternative solutions to this time-crunch, such as La Programa de Hogares Comunitarios de la Secretaria de Obras Sociales de la Esposa del Presidente de la Republica, a cheap daycare program aimed at helping working mothers in mainly urban communities in Guatemala. However, this was not implemented until the 1990’s, and to this day has not touched Santa Catarina (Hallman et al 2005:880-882). Rosa’s options for her younger children were limited.

*The Call to Adventure: The First Flirtation With Work and Taking Care of a Household*

School was the next hurdle for Rosa’s family. Adolfo did not attend school at all: he and Juan went to Panajachel every day to sell trinkets and beg in the streets. Juan went through the sixth grade, and Maria went through the second; even though the school itself was free, the associated costs of pens, paper, and workbooks were too much for the desperately poor family. Rosa, supplementing her income from the tourist market, would sell tortillas and beans out of their street-side house. Her children all helped out, making tortillas and grinding corn. This was Maria’s first foray into housework and her initial introduction into the culinary arts she would later capitalize on. The family managed to scrape by off their minimal income, and Rosa’s faith in the Church and God helped bolster the family’s spirits. Maria’s upbringing, with its emphasis on hard work, family, and the Evangelical Church, laid the foundations for her path later. The support networks that would bolster her own family were present at such an early age: the reliance on what remained of the nuclear family for economic and household support
and the Church as an outlet and a wellspring of hope and faith. Yet it was only through the flames of her own fading life that Maria learned to rely on them.

_Crossing the Threshold: Partnership and Family Support Networks_

Maria met her first love while he was working at a hotel as a cooking assistant. She was seventeen, and he a fresh twenty. Carlos swept her off her feet; they dated three weeks before she moved into his parents’ household. They never married, which is unsurprising as they were both poor and marriage, in addition to costing Q20,000 all told, often leads to costly divorce. The first year was a happy year. Carlos worked and provided a small amount of money for food and clothes, which in Guatemala is “rarely adequate to meet basic survival needs” (Chary et al 2001: 174). Maria stayed inside and did housework. However, crossing the threshold into adulthood held unexpected dangers: he began drinking and abusing her physically.

She gave birth to her first son Ricardo on Monday the eighteenth of October, 1993. The following Friday her mother passed away. The last shreds of her family support network had collapsed: without mother and father she had almost no one left to turn to. Desperate, she started began to sell ice cream in the streets. Jealous, Carlos forbade her from leaving the house, telling her that her role was cooking and cleaning in the house. Betraying his orders resulted in more beatings. Carlos even began to beat a one-year-old Ricardo. They stopped attending Evangelical sermons. Being a drunkard, he was banned from the church, and she followed his lead, losing access to the Religious support network.

Soon after her mother died, Carlos forced Maria to sell her childhood home. She and her brother Juan had no money to pay for a funeral, and the sale scraped together enough for a coffin and a ceremony. By this time her relationship with Carlos had gotten unbearable; in Guatemala many women are forced into single parenthood from factors “including male and female infidelity, male alcohol abuse, [and] intra-family violence” (McIlwaine 2000: 42). She
left Carlos due to the latter two, but she had no home to return to. Ricardo was almost two when she moved in with Juan, who was working as a construction worker to support his growing alcoholism. Their familial support network consisted solely of one another; Juan had split with his partner Rosaria due to interpersonal conflicts several years before. In order to provide for her child, Maria made tamales and other food items and peddled them around town, but had to supplement her income through washing other people’s laundry and collecting firewood. Both these additional jobs required hard work and Maria would exhaust herself climbing the mountain or hand-washing clothes only to come home, make tortillas, and clean the few dishes necessary to then cook dinner for her small family. The work never ended.

*Interlude: Household Roles and Lucita’s Support Networks*

This wearying lifestyle is the modus operandi not only of the single mothers in Santa Catarina, but the population as a whole. Work is scarce and many men have nothing to do but drink all day. Women, if they have a job, work tirelessly at it. If they don’t they spend the day cleaning, washing laundry, making tortillas, and cooking. Some women with spare time devote it to weaving, others to washing other families’ laundry or even cooking for time-strapped parents. These chores are necessarily part of every day, and even women with a job have to find a way to complete them. Men, on the other hand, usually refrain from the housework. Even if their wife dies or leaves, they will often pay others to do their laundry and make their tortillas. Children are a useful tool, as are visiting college students, when approaching the myriad of small tasks that make up a woman’s traditional role in the household. I was washing clothes with a single mother named of Lucita and talking about her experiences with the Evangelical Church and her family support network when two men walked by the house. They stopped and stared: they could not believe a man, even a *gringo* like me, would ever stoop so low as to wash clothing like a woman.
Lucita was in her thirties with two children ages eight and ten. She had been single for twelve years in a joint compound with her parents and sibling. Each had their own room, with a communal sink and dining area. Yet despite the physical closeness of the family, a wall was raised when it came to financial aid. Lucita makes *huipiles*, the traditional blouses worn around Santa Catarina and sold to tourists. Because weaving can be done in the house using a simple back-strap loom, many women make *huipiles*, *fajas* (traditional belts), and other textiles as a way to supplement their husband’s income or lack thereof. However the tourism industry has fallen over the last decade, and where one could once sell a *huipile* for Q500 or Q600 they now go for Q200 at best. So Lucita has turned to the staple job of washing other people’s clothing: Q20 for a large bin. Her father is against providing her with any economic support, saying, “It’s her responsibility to help her kids with their education, their food, their clothing, and their other daily needs” (Lucita, Field notes Feb 23rd 2014).

With very little help from family and certainly no help from friends, who all have their own sets of problems to deal with, her only outside source of support is God and the Evangelical Church. She attends the church *Principe de Paz* (there are four Evangelical Churches in Santa Catarina alone). In God she has found a sort of salvation; she no longer goes to a doctor unless the need is absolutely dire, and she can ask for money and health without having to pay a penny for the privilege. The Church also offers the support of a women’s meeting every week, where women talk about their problems and support each other with prayers and tears. Like Maria, Lucita cites God Himself as a source of support. During our conversation, she told me that “God is always there to help [her] through the little hardships” (Lucita, Field notes Feb 22nd 2014). Yet despite the free support God and the Church provide for free, there is an inherent price for their assistance. All the women I talked to assured me that you must have faith in order for any sort of help to descend from above.
The Road of Trials: Work, Family Ties, and The Beginnings of Fraternal Support

Up until now, Maria’s adult life has been characterized by a lack of the support networks of church, family, and friends. She’s had Juan, yet ever since she embarked on her life’s adventure she’s been without the strong bonds of house and home. Therefore, when Carlos came back when Ricardo was well into his third year of infancy begging forgiveness and promising a change in his abusive habits, she went with him in the hopes of finding the support she had been lacking. Unfortunately, apart from another child, Carlos gave her nothing but grief. So when her newborn Lisa was a month old she left him once and for all, swearing off the entire idea of partnership as a valid way of life. “All men do,” she told me over a dinner of crab soup and tortillas, “is drink. Some work, some are good. But usually they don’t give you money, and try to control your life” (Maria, Field notes Feb 21st 2014). She moved back with Juan for a short time before renting out her own small house. Juan drank, and although he helped with the kids and tried vaguely to support her, she needed the space of her own house.

Still, she did not attend church. She was as isolated as a single mother can be. Juan was drinking himself into oblivion and her only other close relative was her cousin Sofía, who would set Maria to work washing laundry when the need was dire. That was the extent of her familial network. Neighbors were no help: when Maria went to them asking for food they turned her away, telling her to work harder. Ricardo and Lisa were too young to help her around the house; she was so desperate she even had to sell her traje.

One day she received a letter addressed to her deceased mother from a Charles from Michigan. Charles had met Maria’s mother when she was selling tortillas and beans out of her house; he was a tourist in Santa Catarina only a few weeks. Yet they became friends, and he began sending her money periodically to help her raise her children. Maria wrote him back, telling him her mother had passed away several years before, and they have since remained in contact. His frequent gifts would prove an invaluable addition to her Fraternal support network.
Walking along the street one day sixteen years ago, Maria struck up a conversation with a few construction workers who were building a new lakeside mansion. An Italian man was moving there, and he needed a local woman to help him with household chores. He offered Maria a job—which she gladly took—cooking, cleaning, and washing his clothing. He taught her rudimentary Spanish, and though the pay was mediocre, she was marginally better off. He even taught her how to cook well, something she has continued to capitalize on.

Maria worked for the Italian man for nine years. Three years in she bought her current house. Having spent years in and out of debt, she was no stranger to loans and the dangers of the bank. Her kids grew up and started helping her around the house. Ricardo, unlike many boys his age, took up cooking as a way to help his over-worked mother. Lisa cleaned and washed dishes and clothing, filling in the gaps her mother was hard pressed to fill. Both attended school, although neither took to it with much gusto. It now cost money to attend school in addition to buying the requisite supplies. Yet they were a family now, and Maria could rely on her children to help her through the day. Juan had suffered greatly due to his rampant alcoholism; he lost his house, became ill and, in a reversal of roles, came to live in Maria’s new house. The Familial support network was solidifying.

During this relatively calm period in her life, Maria took up another lover. In a bizarrely dark twist of fate, this man’s name was also Carlos. He was quite insistent, wanting her to come and live with him, yet she refused. As luck would have it, this Carlos was also a drunk, and although he did not beat Maria as did the previous one, he was a womanizer. He left her with two more children to raise: Gabriela then Charles, the latter named after their American friend. Six years ago Maria quit her job at the Italian’s house. The work was hard and the pay wasn’t much (Q600 a month). She continued washing clothes as she thought of other ways to make money, something she had been doing supplementarily for years.
Soon she found a job working at a hotel in town as a cook. She made Q1000 a month, but her shifts were from 5am to 4pm, and then again from 7pm to 11pm. Her kids took care of the housework as much as possible, providing her with the support she needed to keep from collapsing outright. But about half a year after she started working life dealt her its most devastating blow to date. Lacking the support of a large family or a tight-knit community, she nearly perished.

*The Abyss: Illness, The Church, and God’s Intervention*

Maria suffered from overwork. As she described it to me, she spent so many hours in the hotel kitchens that she failed to properly feed herself. She got no rest, slept very little, and on top of all that tried to take care of four children. Eventually her body simply broke down. The doctors told her it was malnutrition, ironic considering her profession. She was put on six months of bed rest, three of which she physically could not walk. She saw doctors in Panajachel, Solola, and Guatemala City. Her doctors’ fees reached Q22,000, and she went heavily into debt. She sold her television, her radio, her furniture, her dishes, and her *traje* to try and pay off the bank. Her youngest son Charles began to drink tap water to appease his hunger. Desperate, she at last sought refuge in the only place she had left to turn: God. She went to the Evangelical Church after six months of illness, for the first time in sixteen years. She prayed to God every day and attended church services three days a week, and the women’s meetings on Wednesdays. She prayed for her health and she prayed for money to feed her starving children.

It was a blessing when, out of the blue, her friend Charles from Michigan called to check in on the family. Maria could only equate the coincidence to divine providence. When he heard the severity of the situation he immediately sent Q2,000 to her to help her, and began sending Q400-Q800 a year to make sure the family stayed afloat. This was perhaps the greatest
support for Maria and her family. Economically it guaranteed them a baseline that—while still incredibly below what we would consider the poverty line—ensured their survival. This act of selfless kindness gave Maria a renewed faith in God and the Church, a faith that she assured me is the only reason she’s alive today. She believes fervently that without faith in God you will never receive His blessings. She confronted that belief in God, and had an experience that Joseph Campbell would call an atonement with the Father. In church one day, after nine months of constant war with her body, she experienced a liminal spiritual moment. “A sense of peace rushed through me, filling my arms and my legs and my stomach and my head. I felt healed” (Maria, Field notes Mar 4th 2014). Shortly afterward she fully recovered from her illness. She has been going to church religiously ever since.

The Return: A New Birth and the Future Horizons

Up until now this paper has been nothing more than a life story written with a monomythic theme, hinting at the structure of the so-called ‘support networks’ of religion, friends, and family and their essential nature to life as a single mother. Ethnographically, this has not brought anything save a new story to the literature. Yet in the wake of Maria’s current day situation and her future prospects, I plan to argue that such support networks helps those in need—especially single mothers—navigate a treacherous economic slope. After she recovered from her illness, Maria began to work again. She found that selling small bags of frozen fruit smoothies to the children at the primary school turned a decent profit, and allowed her much more free time to rest and take care of the house. She began making fajas again to sell for tourists, and returned to the age-old employers of firewood and laundry. She received work from her cousin Sofia, and she found sanctuary in Assemblea de Dios and the community of struggling women that met every Wednesday afternoon to talk, laugh, and pray. People supported her, emotionally and to an extent economically. She would even ask the pastor to
help her, saying she was in debt and needed money, and he would ask the parish to donate small amounts of money and food to care for her and any others who asked. Maria was freed through an active safety net of religion, friends (especially Charles), and family. She could rely on her children freely to work around the house and Ricardo began to work in town to earn money for the family as a construction worker. Juan no longer drank and contributed to the household life through physical labor and small amounts of money for joint meals. Life attained a sense of balance from the support networks Maria had suffered so much to find.

I came onto the scene in January of this year. Ricardo had moved to Guatemala City to work as a gardener, sending large amounts of money back to his mother to help her pay for food, water, and electricity. Lisa had recently moved in with her partner Daniél. Gabriela and Charles were enjoying going to school. Gabriela would help her mom with all the household chores, while Charles would play with his toys during his free time. Maria was primarily engaged in making and selling ice cream, a relatively easy process. She still washed laundry for Sofía whenever she got the chance and every Sunday she was engaged as a cook with Sofía’s daughter for the first half of the day. She went up the mountain once every two months to gather firewood, more for herself than to sell. Every summer she would spend a week cooking for a restaurant in town, and over the Christmas holidays she became a freelance cook for parties and festivals.

When I returned after a month of travel, things had already improved. Maria now owned a store in the larger high school, selling a variety of goods. Every weekday at 3:45pm sharp the store would fill with students, leaving the shelves barren in their wake. It was harder work than selling ice cream, because she had to prepare multiple handmade items every day, yet she earned more money. She even enlisted the help of her friends and family, with Daniél, Gabriela, Charles, Juan, Lisa, and occasionally Ricardo working the store.
Now she owned two televisions, plenty of *traje*, and was only in debt Q7,000 and quickly paying it off. Not only were they no longer among the poorest of the poor, but they were thriving and rapidly ascending the socioeconomic ladder. Life was still hard; Lisa became gravely ill and had a miscarriage the second week I was there. Maria cooked, cleaned, and cared for her on top of her own work in the house and store. I helped as best I could, acting as another member of her Familial support network through housework. She even found time to volunteer for the church, cooking food for Sunday fundraising meals and cleaning the church before services. Her life no longer revolved solely around the survival of her nuclear clan. She was now a fully participatory member, both in giving and receiving, of the support networks that had lifted her out of abject poverty and into a new life. The life she had crafted for herself and her kids was truly extraordinary, and her transformation from a dependent, poor mother to an independent, economically savvy matriarch is something of fascinating beauty. Beneath all the hard work and success, however, lies a foundational web of support networks.

**Analysis: Support Networks as a Foundation for Economic Success**

Throughout the story of her life, Maria has relied both consciously and unconsciously on what I call support networks, or communities geared towards cooperative action and communal growth. Such networks not only provide comfort emotionally from the stresses of poverty and suffering, but also give their members enough free space economically to pull themselves out of abject poverty and put themselves on the path to economic success. These communities can be categorized into three groups: the Fraternal, the Religious, and the Familial.
The Fraternal

This is by far the least impactful community of the spectrum of support networks in Santa Catarina, and the most broad. Yet it has still played a key role in alleviating Maria’s many sufferings and allowing her room to maneuver the economic quagmire of impoverished Guatemala. This support network includes neighbors and friends (excluding the Church community, which is a separate category). In Maria’s case, her neighbors were of no help—they simply told her to find more work when she desperately turned to them for food. However she has in recent times been a boon to her own neighbors: during the rainy season her house hosts refugees from more dangerous, landslide-prone areas of town. So the network is still functioning, albeit in more extenuating circumstances. Neighbors have problems of their own, and they have neither a responsibility nor an incentive to give monetary support.

Friends are slightly more lenient, although Maria received almost no help from that community. Charles, Maria’s American benefactor, is a special case. Here a bond more resembling a familial connection formed between the older man and Maria’s family, exemplified by the name of her youngest child. He continues to send money and school supplies every year—once going as far as to send a microwave oven—and on his last visit he brought a blender. All told, Charles’s support has been the foundation for her economic rebirth.

The Fraternal support network is the least effective of the three I investigated. This is in part because of a lack of incentives. Friends and neighbors understand the hardships of life in Santa Catarina, but because of their own fragile circumstances they have no substantial support to give. It takes a certain type friendship to provide the connection necessary for actual monetary aid, a type resembling that of the Familial support network rather than the Fraternal. Charles was a close friend of the family, and his patronage remains an outlier in the larger Santa Catarina community due to his unique relationship and his privileged status as an American.
Contrastingly, the support network of the Evangelical Church is incredibly effective, although there are costs of participation. The first is a belief in God and the teachings of the Bible. The second is a refusal of all alcoholic beverages. The third is socially enforced volunteerism and donations. Small donations at the church services are expected of all good Evangelicals, and those who can are expected to pitch in more for the Church’s projects and upkeep. Maria is one of many members of the Assemblea de Dios who pledged to pay a portion of the year’s electricity cost. Members also cycle through a rotation of volunteers for both the cleaning of the church itself and the preparing and selling of food for the Sunday fundraisers. However, once you effectively ‘buy in,’ the community serves as a multi-faceted support network addressing emotional, spiritual, and at times economic needs.

Every service I attended, including the incredibly public concert series in the town square, had a large segment of women breaking down into tears and sobbing. They stand up and clap to the music, each singing along or giving praise to God or whispering prayers under her breath. They work themselves up into a highly emotional state, feeling safe within the confines of the church’s walls. They open their souls up to God and weep, and the catharsis provided by such prayer is visibly apparent by the end of each service. It truly is “the most desperate women who tend to join Evangelical congregations” (Carter 2004: 637). There is also a women’s meeting every Wednesday, where the women of the church get together to cry, pray, and gossip, providing a social outlet for overworked, housebound mothers.

I interviewed a total of three single mothers who were part of the Evangelical Church: Maria, Lucita, and Petrona. All three attend church regularly and volunteer their precious time as cleaning and cooking staff. Maria attributes her current, relatively higher standard of living entirely to God; God healed her, moved Charles’s heart to send them money, and brings patrons to her door looking to buy something. Both Maria and Lucita assure me that in the case of
sickness they turn to God before any doctor because He can be trusted, and because He’s free. Lucita told me God helps her “through the little hardships” and she can always ask Him for a little more money or for the continued health of a child (Lucita, Field notes Feb 22nd 2014). Petrona felt similarly: “God helps you when you need Him” (Petrona, Field notes Feb 22nd 2014).

Apart from God being a fountainhead of hope and assistance, on a more secular level the Evangelical Church provides its members with financial assistance when needed. Maria told me that you can ask the pastor for aid, whether in food or money or clothes or some other necessity, and at his next sermon he will ask his flock to give what they can. The collective pot is passed around, and people give in the name of God to help someone who otherwise would have—had they tuned up on the doorstep in the same state—been told to “work more” (Maria. Field notes Mar 4th). In sum, the Evangelical Church is an incredibly support network, providing an outlet for problems deemed insurmountable in the form of God as well as supporting its members through charity and social outlets.

The Familial

Of all the support networks investigated thus far, the Familial is the most important. It is the birthright of every child around the globe, and provides the formative environment for childhood and the lasting bonds of shared responsibility as members go their separate ways. In Santa Catarina the family ties are strong: often three generations reside under one roof. Kinship networks are a way to tie oneself economically to a larger pool of resources. Being a single mother, however, effectively cuts that network in half. Maria has had to rely on her own family for her entire life, in turn providing them support when she could. Her mother Rosa raised her, and Maria worked tirelessly in the house alongside her brothers to help support the struggling family. When Rosa died she left them a house, which then funded the funeral. Juan sheltered
Maria in her times of need, and when he was destitute and ill she housed him. Reciprocity is key within a family dynamic as it ensures aid when one needs it. Their cousin Sofía has continually given Maria work when she’s needed it, and when Maria was gravely ill she even gave her money to help cover some of the medical expenses.

Maria’s children were raised in this umbrella of support, as tattered as it was. They grew up helping their mother around the house, and when Ricardo was old enough to work he constantly worked to provide for the necessities of household life such as food and utilities. Lisa left to live with her partner, but both she and Daniél spend time working in Maria’s store, earning their own money as well as assisting her aging mother. Even the younger kids help out; every day Gabriela would make all the handmade items to sell the next day in the store. She and Charles also participated in the myriad of household chores, giving their mother the time she needed to cook and prepare for the never-ending needs of the store. Everyone helps out everyone else, and together they have slowly built up material wealth out of deep poverty.

Other examples of this effective and engrained social network include the families of Lucita and Petrona, the single mothers in whose households I worked. They both lived in family compounds with a central courtyard where everyone helped with communal chores. However, Lucita’s parents refused to support her financially as it was “her responsibility” to provide for her own nuclear family, and Petrona’s father is too old to work and cannot give her anything (Lucita, Field notes Feb 23rd 2014). Their extended families, apart from helping with chores, have their own lives and cannot support either of them over the long run. Luckily for Petrona, and her son sends money back to her from Guatemala City much like Maria’s Ricardo. While Lucita is much poorer than Petrona, both benefit from the support networks of their families.

The Familial support network is a pervasive, universal underpinning of family life. Everyone relies on one another in some way or form. For the single mothers of Santa Catarina,
they lean on their extended families when times are tough, yet they also recognize their own status as an independent matriarch with the responsibility of providing a decent life for their offspring. Maria, Lucita, and Petrona are all independent economically, and can stand on their own within their family. However, without the timely support of family, they would fall through the cracks into abject poverty.

Conclusions

The life of a single mother anywhere is bound to be difficult, and Santa Catarina is no exception. Yet with the aid of support networks, such mothers can maneuver the economic landscape and earn enough to provide a decent quality of life for their children. Maria is a prime example: her life dealt her serious blows yet today she is moving towards relative wealth in a community stricken by poverty. She turned to three different support networks: the Fraternal, the Religious, and the Familial. Charles provided her a foundation of money from which to build up her business and household. The Evangelical Church took her in and gave her a shoulder to cry on and a community to provide meaning and financial support in an otherwise bleak existence. Initially, her family was torn and left to only her and her brother. Yet she slowly built up the support of children and their eventual partners, providing for them while they gave their own help to the struggling household. Without these three pillars of support, Maria would not own a house, two televisions, and two cell phones. She would not have traje or sufficient dishes to serve her well-cooked food. She would, in short, never have risen above her humble beginnings.

These support networks are not unique to Maria. Evangelical churches and other religious institutions dot the hillsides around Lake Atitlan, and friends and family come together to help one another on a daily basis. They are the foundations of community. These support networks are absolutely essential for those in need, such as single mothers. However,
each person’s networks may not be functioning on the same level. Maria and Petrona had much more supportive families than Lucita. Maria had the influential support of Charles, which was an extremely unique Fraternal situation. All three mothers, however, used the Evangelical Church to its maximum potential, seeking economic, spiritual, and emotional support.

On the whole, the Fraternal network is the least effective due to a lack of incentives: friends cannot be relied upon when they have their own not insignificant struggles. Family is the most enduring, yet its grasp is tenuous at best. Maria was once stranded with only a brother and a cousin, both unable to give much. When the Familial network is intact, and—unlike in the case of Lucita—is willing to give support, its effects can be the strongest. However it is the Religious support network that remains the strongest source of support. With only a small price for participation and huge spiritual and emotional, as well as slight economic, dividends, it is the most significant factor in a single mother’s life.

This may mean nothing. Friends, family, and religion are enormous parts of life everywhere, and pigeonholing them into support networks you lose essential aspects of each. Yet for single mothers in Santa Catarina, these are the fundamental ingredients for life. Work, provide for a family, go to church, see the neighbors around town. That’s what’s in a day. From these humble beginnings, even the most destitute can turn their life around, finding support in the everyday people and institutions of Santa Catarina Palopó.
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