“The Kakchikel Double Shift: NGO Membership, Domestic Duties and Familial Power Dynamics in Santa Catarina Palopó”

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Abstract

This paper is a case study of the effects that participation in a women’s association have on participants’ home lives and family dynamics. Using ethnographic research over twenty-seven days I explored the organizational structure of *Las Mujeres Mayas* of Santa Catarina Palopó as well as the motivations and family situations of six of its members. The women’s reasons for joining the organization are chiefly economic, and participation in *Las Mujeres Mayas* has been incorporated into families’ pre-existing economic strategies. The association has not substantially altered the domestic responsibilities of members despite the disruption that comes with the women’s attendance of the organization’s meetings. Effects on personal self-esteem of the members have been positive, but familial power dynamics remain patriarchal.

Introduction and Background Literature

Santa Catarina Palopó is a Kakchikel Maya town of about 5,000 people located on the steep shores of Guatemala’s picturesque Lake Atitlán. One typically reaches on the back of a packed pickup truck after making the short drive from neighboring (and much larger) Panajachel. Upon arrival you will be invariably be greeted by small children selling bracelets, and the walk to the lakeshore involves passing a multitude of *vendedoras*, women selling handmade weavings and a variety of knick knacks. A majority of women in town wear indigenous *traje*, which here means a deep blue *huipil* with a characteristic bird pattern; there is also a thick head wrap that can be of various colors, although its use in particular and the wearing of *traje* in general seems to be on the decline. The importance of weaving to this town is apparent to any visitor from the citizens’ dress as well as the dizzying variety of woven items available. The sale of these to tourists is one of the primary ways in which Santa Catarina’s residents make money. The weaving industry is also singularly important to the women’s non-governmental association which is the focus of this study, *Las Mujeres Mayas*, though their intended market is different

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1 “The Mayan Women” in Spanish
2 “saleswoman” in Spanish
3 “form of dress” in Spanish
4 The Spanish term for a blouse commonly worn by Indigenous women from Central Mexico to Central America
Recent decades have seen the genesis and rapid growth of Guatemalan non-governmental organizations (NGO’s), devoted to the improvement of women’s situations. The rise of this type of organization has been variously attributed to the enduring hardships faced by female Guatemalans (particularly indigenous women) (Rapone and Simpson 1996: 118-119), Guatemala’s shift to multi-party democracy (Berger 2006: 1), and the rise of a “new feminism” in Latin America (Hallum 2003: 181). In “Doing Good? The Politics and Anti-Politics of NGO’s” William Fisher makes the case that NGO’s must be understood by analyzing a specific organization in a specific place at a specific time, and the micropolitics both around and within that organization. He then decries the lack of such studies (Fisher 1997: 441), claiming that most of the literature is on a large scale, often focusing on funding. In this paper I attempt to fill the aforementioned hole in the literature by doing a case study of Las Mujeres Mayas, the largest and longest-running women’s NGO in Santa Catarina. The organization’s prominence within the community was the primary reason I chose to focus on it.

This organization has already been studied as part of Patricia Green’s 2010 senior thesis for Carleton College. Green compared the structure of Las Mujeres Mayas with two other women’s associations in Santa Catarina with relation to the individual sense of empowerment held by each organization’s members. In her thesis Green expressed a desire to further explore the women’s home lives; that is what I have done in this paper, paying special attention to the roots of women’s desire to join the association as well as how their participation has affected their self-esteem and family dynamics. In effect I have attempted to move beyond the meetings of the association (although I also attended meetings) in order to discover what the participating women take with them into the rest of their lives.
Some prominent studies of working women and their families are Arlie Hochschild’s landmark book *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*, Constantina Safilios-Rothschild’s “The Influence of the Wife's Degree of Work Commitment upon Some Aspects of Family Organization and Dynamics” and Haya al-Dajani’s “Impact of women’s home-based enterprise on family dynamics: Evidence from Jordan”. Hochschild found in her study of American families that despite women’s participation in the workplace they continued to shoulder the majority of domestic responsibility. “Just as there is a wage gap between men and women in the workplace, there is a ‘leisure gap’ between them at home. Most women work one shift at the office or factory and a ‘second shift' at home,” (Hochschild 1989: 4). Safilios-Rothschild concluded that more work activity in women coincided with more marital satisfaction, and a greater feeling of female empowerment in familial decision making (Safilios-Rothschild 1970: 681). In contrast Al-Dajani’s study of women Palestinian women employed in the home found that “while some degree of empowerment is attained, challenges to embedded patriarchy are limited,” (Al-Dajani 2010: 175).

“Global Processes and Local Lives: Guatemalan Women’s Work and Gender Relations at Home and Abroad” by Cecilia Menjívar is a study of working women’s families that was partially conducted in rural Guatemala among Kakchikel Maya. Menjívar’s study is much broader than mine; she compares Maya and Ladino families of various social classes both in Guatemala and the United States. She finds Maya family dynamics to be relatively more affected than Ladino ones, and that Maya families proceeded from a relatively more egalitarian starting point (Menjívar 2006: 102). However she does not find working outside the home to be universally empowering for women. While it can increase their autonomy, “women's employment sometimes reinforces patriarchal relations that make them a vulnerable, low-cost
labor for capitalism,” (Menjívar 2006: 95).

In this paper I analyze the effects of women’s participation in *Las Mujeres Mayas* on the economic situation of their families as well as the members’ domestic responsibilities, self-esteem and familial power dynamics. The economic situation of the women and their families has improved, but the familial economic strategy and women’s domestic responsibilities are essentially continuous with pre-membership life. Decision-making within the family remains patriarchal despite a shift in gender discourse.

**Methodology**

I conducted my research from January 9th through 11th, January 13th through 15th, and again from February 13th through March 5th. To do the research I employed formal and informal interviews, as well as observation and participant observation. The observation consisted of sitting in on meetings of *Las Mujeres Mayas*. I made repeated visits to five of its member families and a single visit to a third; during these visits I conducted mostly formal interviews, although I strived for a more informal conversation. I practiced participant observation by helping with household projects. I also lived with the legal representative of the association as well as two of its members; all three are sisters, conducting informal interviews with them. I have used pseudonyms for all of my consultants except for my host sisters Lidia and Irma Cumesz, from whom I received explicit permission to use their real names.

Three factors significantly affected the ways in which I was able to obtain information. The first was my host family, which was both a help and a hindrance in their desire to aid my research. Lidia Cumesz, my twenty-four year-old host sister, is a founding member of *Las Mujeres Mayas* as well as its legal representative and a force of nature. As her older sister Irma, a member of the association who also lives in the family’s compound with her four children, says
“Lidia loves to work with groups. It would give me headache.” (Cumesz, Interview February 16th, 2014). Lidia’s passion for her work was a prominent factor in sparking my interest in Las Mujeres Mayas. She invited me to attend meetings and personally facilitated making appointments with members of the association (Cumesz, Interview January 13th). The family also sent along one of my host sisters with me to help me find houses and to interpret—many of the association’s members and their husbands do not speak much Spanish (Field Notes February 16th-18th). The guidance was certainly necessary for my first interviews as Santa Catarina is a maze of narrow alleyways that left me perpetually lost during my first days there.

All of this was very helpful in introducing me to families, but it also worried me. The first few interviews I conducted were overwhelmingly positive concerning the organization, and I thought that having an immediate relative of the leader of Las Mujeres Mayas conducting the interview with me may have had something to do with it. After the first interviews I memorized where women’s houses were, secured permission for return visits, and politely suggested to my host sisters that it would be better if I conducted further research on my own.

Upon returning to various women’s houses I encountered the second factor which substantially affected my research, linguistic difficulties. Spanish is the second language of my consultants as well as myself and my knowledge of Kakchikel remains pitiful; this led to some difficulties in understanding. However they were not insurmountable. Many of the husbands spoke understandable Spanish which I gathered was largely a result of working for Spanish-speaking employers. When I talked to the women without their husbands, their children could often translate, or they would have enough words that we could get by on our own. The lack of the constant presence of a fully fluent translator likely led to some errors of interpretation on my part, but I feel that the knowledge gained as a result of the change in interview style more than
made up for this unfortunate fact.

The other factor that substantively affected my research was my gender. Much of the research on gender is conducted by female anthropologists, and the history of the program is no different. I am male and I initially feared that this could translate into reticence on the part of women to talk to me. I never felt unwelcome, though some assumed that I would not want to talk to them without their husbands present. My gender helped me in gaining access to some members of the families. Fortunately, they were willing to put me to work doing manual labor, on projects in which women were not participating. These interactions led to some of my most productive conversations with male members of the households. After I helped them work the families would feed me, and as I ate with them there was further opportunity for the type informal chats which I prized.

**Organizational Structure**

*Las Mujeres Mayas* was started in 2008 and at latest count consisted of 183 members. The organization is primarily for the procurement of basic economic necessities. The women receive money for projects, or the organization buys things for them with the profits of their efforts: one notable example of this was a number roofs that were distributed to members. The women pay dues to keep the organization running and registered as well as ones related to the specific projects in which they participate. The organization can also appeal to the departmental or federal government for aid in accomplishing projects, which is the benefit of being legally registered (Cumesz, Field Notes January 15th 2014). When Patricia Green studied *Las Mujeres Mayas* it was smaller and seemed to be largely dependent on government aid; this dependence meant that the inefficiency of Guatemala’s government was a major impediment to the group’s projects and the women’s sense of empowerment (Green 2010: 33). Lidia tells me that the group
is now much more dependent on its members for the projects, and she the growing size of the group has allowed this increase in self-sufficiency (Cumesz, Field Notes February 9th, 2014).

The largest project is the weaving group, which has twenty-five to thirty members, depending on women’s availability. The families I got to know were all drawn from the weaving project, as they were the most active in the organization. The weavers use thread purchased at a bulk rate by the association before selling their weavings back to Las Mujeres Mayas which in turn sells them in pre-negotiated deals to buyers in the United States and Spain (Cumesz, Field Notes January 15th 2014).

The organization is led by a five-member board of young unmarried women, selected because they do not have children and are literate in Spanish. The board organizes projects with input from the older members. Along with its economic purpose, the organization is intended to promote female rights. Lidia expressed a desire to give women more of a voice in Santa Catarina, and the slogan of Las Mujeres Mayas is “conociendo y luchando por sus derechos” (Cumesz, Field Notes February 8th, 2014). The meetings I attended were dominated by the board of directors, in particular Lidia, to whom the others seemed to turn with questions. The five of them did almost all the talking. That said, the señorases were anything but meek listeners. They interjected frequently in strident tones, and people laughed often. This held true for both the smaller meeting of weavers as well as the much larger all-group meeting (Field notes February 15th, 22nd 2014).

There are multiple other women’s associations in Santa Catarina, primarily focused on weaving and economic empowerment like Las Mujeres Mayas. I received mixed messages about the relations between groups. Andrea Cotzal participates in multiple organizations; I walked past her participating in a meeting on my way to interview her husband Luis. Luis told me that there

5 “learning about and fighting for their rights” in Spanish
was no trouble in participating in multiple groups (Cotzal, Field Notes February 24th 2014). According to Magdalena Perez, attending other meetings is discouraged by Las Mujeres Mayas’ board of directors. Jennifer Carrillo, who was expelled from Las Mujeres Mayas has never joined another group because it is difficult to integrate oneself in another organization after being involved in Las Mujeres Mayas. Jennifer also spoke of receiving community stigma from being expelled, and believed that the board of directors had acted autocratically and unfairly in expelling her without warning (Carrillo, Field Notes February 19th 2014). This stigma may explain why she was unable to join another group. Other members told me that the group always informs members before expelling them, but Jennifer was in Antigua at the time which may explain her lack of knowledge. For her part Lidia is dismissive of other groups, saying that they formed in the wake of Las Mujeres Mayas’ success but that they lack the same organizational unity or staying power.

Motivations for Joining the Association

The reason the members joined the association was, in every case I encountered, was explicitly economic necessity. The particulars of this reasoning took different forms. Cristina Sanchez, a newer member who had only been in the association for six months, joined because she saw the benefits reaped by women who had previously joined the association. Her husband Jose said simply: “for the necessities. To give the children something to eat,” (Sanchez, Field Notes February 16th, 2014). Other women, including Olga Lopez and Magdalena, made repeated mention to the education of their children. It costs money to go to school, progressively more as

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6This use of funds for education presents a particularly hopeful note for future generations in Santa Catarina. Almost all children are educated through the sixth grade-more than their parents, and the high school classes are growing every year. What’s more, equal emphasis seems to be placed on educating girls and boys. The fact that this education is possible is a direct result of increased earnings that come with participation in Las Mujeres Mayas. Olga once told me that she didn’t want her granddaughter helping her around the house: “The way she helps me is by studying,” (Lopez, Field Notes February 19th 2014)
the children get older. Additionally older children who are in school cannot draw in extra money by working themselves. Many young children help their mothers in selling weavings on the street. Maria Nimakachi’s husband Pedro, who claimed that his children do not want to go to school past the sixth grade, was particularly grateful for the roof they received (Nimakachi, Field Notes February 17th 2014).

Economic impoverishment is common in Santa Catarina, but these families in many cases had added reason for strain and/or utter dependence on the earnings of the women. All of the men suffered from underemployment; despite the increasing population of Santa Catarina there does not seem to be enough work for builders. Roberto, who is married to Magdalena, who previously had a good job guarding a chalet near town, was laid off when the owner sold the place and moved back to America (Perez, Field Notes February 19th 2014). This left the family with debt from loans he took out with the expectation of keeping his steady job. Pedro is a fisherman, and the supply of fish in Lake Atitlan has been dwindling for decades. Some of the men supplement their income by gathering firewood from the mountains above Santa Catarina. However this is not a viable way to support a family. A full load of firewood sells for twenty-five Quetzals, or a little over three dollars. The work is backbreaking, and it is not feasible to make more than two trips per day. Jose only makes one trip per day now, saying that when he used to do two he was unable to walk for the rest of the day (Sanchez, Field Notes February 20th 2014). I accompanied him once; he chuckled at my ineptness with the machete, at my soft, easily blistered hands and at the way I slipped every few feet on our way back down the mountain path. The firewood is attached to one’s head using a tump-line, a carrying device common throughout Mesoamerica and I felt the strain on my neck for days afterward despite the relative lightness of my load compared with Jose’s. I cannot imagine trying to make a living this way, but it is the
reality of life for many men in Santa Catarina. Most mornings the mountain paths are full of men young and old carrying massive loads of wood.

Adding to the already-present difficulties in supporting the family, I discovered that at least three of the husbands that I talked to are alcoholics. I typically learned this knowledge indirectly—in one case Gustavo told me about his father’s addiction as we shared lunch (Nimakachi, Field Notes February 19th 2014), in another one of the husbands missed appointments with me two days in a row before his wife ashamedly told my host sister that his drunkenness was the reason. Olga’s husband is fifty-seven; this makes him ineligible for the strenuous physical labor that is a part of nearly every job available to the residents of Santa Catarina (Lopez, Field Notes February 19th 2014).

Another economic hardship afflicting many families in Santa Catarina is the destructiveness of the rainy season. Two different families which I interviewed had had their houses filled with cascading rubble during a storm. One of them, whose matriarch is Olga, continued to stay in their partially rebuilt house. When I interviewed her she gestured to the state of disrepair but expressed resignation over the prospect of finishing it (Lopez, Field Notes February 19th 2014). The other storm-ravaged family, headed by Cristina and Jose, had moved into a smaller place with the help of a donation by an American protestant minister. I helped Maria’s family dig a drainage ditch so the same would not happen to them; their house is regularly the site of minor flooding. In reality I mostly carted buckets full of debris to a dumping site while Maria’s sons hacked at the stony soil with a shovel and pickaxe. As we worked her sons related to me the story of how two of their neighbors’ children drowned last year attempting to escape their flooding house. Adding to the misery caused by this destruction, all of the building going on in the Lake Atitlan area has apparently radically driven up prices for building
materials; this makes rebuilding one’s house exceedingly difficult. Jose was clearly embarrassed by the gaping holes in his roof and repeatedly explained his intention of fixing them while lamenting the cost of materials (Sanchez, Field Notes February 19th 2014).

All of these families had five or more children to take care of, and two of them had also taken in grandchildren from parents who were unable or unwilling to take care of them. Olga’s daughter in-law was unable to produce milk for either of her children, so Olga and her husband took them both in and bought formula. Cristina and Jose’s son in-law left their daughter; when the daughter remarried her new husband did not want to raise another man’s children. This led to the children’s abandonment, and subsequent adoption by their grandparents. Olga expressed no resentment over the occurrence, while Jose seemed upset with his daughter, using the word “abandonment” repeatedly (Sanchez, Field Notes February 16th 2014). In any case the addition of two children adds to the pre-existing financial strain of both of these families; understandably the added money available from membership in Las Mujeres Mayas is extremely desirable for all of the participating people. Some of the women mention benefits to their self-esteem which stem from their participation and I will discuss these later, but the economic necessity of providing for their family was always given as the paramount reason for joining.

**Familial Economic Strategies**

All of the women I talked to agreed that participating in Las Mujeres Mayas meant that they left the house more, with the exception of one woman who said that it was more or less the same. However this did not mean that they had not left the house at all previously. It also, to my surprise, did not mean that membership in the association was the beginning of their efforts to monetarily support their families. The women did agree that weaving was the primary or only way for a woman with a family to make a substantial amount of money (Field Notes February
However before their participation in the association they had pre-existing deals with the *vendedoras*, the women who sell weavings on the tourist street in Santa Catarina. One woman had even travelled to Antigua to sell her weavings, and continued to do so after she was expelled from the association for missing meetings. (Cotzal, Field Notes February 17th). Olga continues to make alternate weavings to sell to the *vendedoras* and other women sold the weavings that did not meet *Las Mujeres Mayas*’ rigorous quality standards to alternate sources (Field Notes February 16th-19th). A conversation with one of the *vendedoras* confirmed that she both made her own weavings and purchased from various members of the community with which she had social ties.

The women unanimously confirmed that there were major economic benefits gained by their participation. The price was slightly better than that given by the *vendedoras*, and more importantly it was steady. There is constant demand and no haggling. This helped during the periodic times of unemployment that all of the men I interviewed went through, providing something of a safety net for hard times. The thread provided by the association also greatly defrayed the cost of producing weavings, and the techniques and loom technology discussed in meetings improved weaving efficient (Field Notes February 17th-19th). During the meeting I attended a new variation on the loom was passed around, eyed critically by all of the members. Similarly, one day when I visited Jose I found him carving a similar instrument with his machete.

Andrea among others told me that this is the way it has always been for them, and that it is a common practice in Santa Catarina. Each member of the is expected to strive in order to collect enough money in order to communally provide for themselves. I heard from multiple families that the practice often includes members of extended family or grown, married children with families of their own. For example Gustavo told me that the lunch we were eating together
had been jointly purchased by the thirteen or so relatives of both genders and at least three generations who were simultaneously dining throughout the compound (Nimakachi, Field Notes February 19th 2014).

In all of the families I talked to with the exception of one, the women were in charge of family finances. The explanation given for this was that as they were the ones who watched the children and maintained the house they were most able to see and understand the family’s needs. It was also implied that women had more spare time with which to make shopping excursions. The husband, along with any other financially productive members of the families, give their earnings to the wives. The spouses then discuss the purchases to be made and the wife goes to the market. The one exception to this rule was Andrea’s family; her husband Angel did the shopping because he worked in the neighboring town of Panajachel and could find a better deal there (Cotzal, Field Notes February 24th 2014). In light of the prevalence of alcoholism it is unlikely that all of each man’s earnings were deposited with his wife, but it was made clear to me that in most cases she was in charge of procuring necessities.

The joining of Las Mujeres Mayas thus represents an increase in earning power and in time spent outside of the house, but not the reason they were leaving. The women were expected to contribute monetarily before, they are simply now more effective at it. All of their actions are still taken for the benefit of the family, particularly their children. This includes the meetings, for if they did not attend they could not be in the organization at all. Participation in the association changes the degree of their economic activity, but it is not a radical change in the type of activity, motivation for that activity or the overall economic strategy of the family. Similarly, while participation in the organization forced adjustments in the completion of domestic tasks, women’s responsibilities did not shift significantly.
Domestic Responsibilities

I received consistent answers from all of the families about what constituted women’s work versus men’s work. Women’s work involves weaving, washing, cooking and taking care of young children. Men’s duties include household repairs and money-earning outside jobs. The jobs of the men I spoke to were construction work, gardening, fishing, gathering firewood from the mountain and in one case coffee growing. One task that I saw both genders perform was the splitting of wood for the family stove. Additionally in the house which I lived both genders and the children coiled thread in preparation for weaving, though only the women did the weaving itself. The major dividing factor seems to be that all of women’s work takes place inside of the house, including money-making activity while men’s work can happen both inside and outside. Men’s ways of earning money are exclusively outside of the home; additionally their at-home responsibilities seem much less constant than that of women. For example, when I visited Magdalena’s house the female members of the family were invariably washing, weaving, cooking or holding children.. The men and boys were either out of the house or idle. The division is not perfect; in some conversations women talked about female relatives who found work in restaurants or tortillerías7. (Field Notes February 27th 2014).

Despite the somewhat murky reality, in the discourse on this subject the married woman’s responsibility is emphatically seen to be inside of the house, with the children. When she leaves the house it is only for tasks that directly benefit the children and the family as a whole. It is temporary adjustment for the husband to be taking care of the children, not a new norm; Roberto is a glaring exception in his willingness to cook and clean, and even in his case it is only when there are no women around. In fact I never saw him performing domestic labor because whenever I visited both spouses were home. This gendered division of labor is taken to

7 “Tortilla store” in Spanish
be a natural fact of life, the way things have always been, and it seems to hold true for the vast majority of the time. No one I talked to expressed any discontent with the division; in fact it is seen as complementary and conducive to a more effective running of the household (Cotzal, Field Notes February 26th 2014). Cristina and Maria laughed at the idea of men weaving; they are not accustomed to it and do not have the training (Nimakachi, Sanchez Field notes February 26th-27th 2014). Similarly Gustavo (Maria’s son) explained the lack of outside employment available to women as a result of their lack of training in these areas, and the need for them to watch the children (Nimakachi, Field Notes February 26th 2014).

There was a mixed reaction among the women as to how their participation in Las Mujeres Mayas had affected their ability to complete household responsibilities. At a meeting multiple women said that the work was never finished no matter what she did, so leaving for meetings had not really changed her life in this respect (Field Notes February 15th 2014). This response elicited much sympathetic laughter among the women. In a personal interview Olga admitted that the meetings had added strain to her life: she needed to do the cooking or washing significantly faster now, or else it would not get done. Sometimes her young granddaughter helped her in the mornings but Olga would rather the girl be doing schoolwork than chores (Lopez, Field Notes February 19th 2014). Others said that it was not much of a problem due to support networks of female relatives; sisters or grown daughters would come over to help when the mother was drawn away from home.

Husbands’ active participation in housework was minimal. The men said that they did more around the house due to their wives’ participation in Las Mujeres Mayas, but this was limited watching the children for short periods of time during meetings. Even this duty was usually performed by adult female relatives such as sisters or older daughters, as was all cooking
and washing done in the wives’ absence. Magdalena’s husband Roberto said that he had always helped with cooking and cleaning, and continued to do so (Perez, Field Notes February 19th 2014). However he was the sole exception to the rule. In contrast, Menjívar found that Mayan men in Guatemala were significantly more likely to help with household chores when their wives were away than were their Ladino counterparts (Menjívar 2006: 100). Menjívar studied families whose wives worked entirely outside of the home so that may account for some of the disparity in our findings. In my research the women did their weavings at home and left infrequently for meetings or to turn finished weavings in to the board of directors. This represented a more temporary disruption and could correspondingly have caused less adjustment in familial responsibilities. In the cases where men watched the children in their wives’ absence the domestic duties were invariably returned to the wife upon her return home. The women’s domestic duties were not lessened by their leaving the house; their ability to complete these duties was simply interrupted by the demands of the organization.

The combined domestic and economic responsibilities of married Santa Catarina women lead to incredibly busy lives. Andrea described it as having two jobs (Field Notes February 19th 2014). This evidence mirrors the general conclusions of Menjívar’s study. Drawing on the concept popularized by Hochschild, Menjívar argues that “in spite of their growing importance as paid workers, women continue to assume major obligations in the home, leaving them with the burden of a ‘second shift,’” (Menjivar 2006: 95). This is what I found in Santa Catarina; despite any adjustments made by their families to compensate for the women’s added time away from home, their domestic responsibilities did not substantively decrease.

**Changes in Female Self-Esteem**

During the first *Las Mujeres Mayas* meeting which I attended, I asked the women
collectively if they had gained anything from the group other than economic aid. Lidia struggled to translate the flurry of Kakchikel with the occasional intermixed Spanish word before asking the women to proceed one by one. This is how all of my questions to any women of the group were answered; it did not matter whom I was addressing, women would interject with such frequency that it became impossible to discern who was saying what (hence the collectively addressed questions). The answers I received mirrored those found by Green, who writes “Las Mujeres Mayas offer a forum where women can gather to socialize and share their ideas. This space that the directiva created is indispensable to the success of their group and their work towards liberating the women’s voices of Santa Catarina,” (Green 2010: 41). The women were happy to have this place to chat about their common experiences and share knowledge and community gossip with one another. In an interview with Andrea the next week she confirmed this impression: “Before I joined the association I had never attended a meeting. Before the association women did not have the right to organize themselves. They only had the right to stay home and raise children,” (Cotzal, Field Notes February 17th 2014). Olga in a separate interview mentioned that she did not know what a meeting was before she joined the association. She hardly left the house at all, as the vendadoras came to her to order weavings. Her work seems to be in high demand. It makes her happy to participate, despite the time it takes away from her housework (Lopez, Field Notes February 19th 2014).

At the original meeting, I asked women if this comradery followed them when they left the meetings-if they wove together or ever got together to chat. The collective answer was emphatically no. They did not see each other unless they were at meetings or were close relatives. The women only left their house for necessities, going to the market or attending meetings (Field Notes February 15th 2014). However this did not mean that the effects on the
women’s mentalities were felt solely in the meetings. Olga spoke about the knowledge she gained in the association, both of women’s right to organize and of new weaving techniques. It gratified her to share this knowledge she had gained from the outside world with her extended family, who often visited her (Interview January 17th 2014). She would not have had the increased self-esteem and familial prestige without her participation in *Las Mujeres Mayas*.

**Effects on Family Power Dynamics**

I asked each of the families if the women’s participation in *Las Mujeres Mayas* had affected the ways in which the couples made decisions. Jose and Cristina responded with an emphatic yes, that decision-making was much more equal now (Sanchez, Field Notes February 16th 2014). Magdalena and Roberto said that their relationship had always been equal, that they made choices in a dialogue and that the organization had not changed that (Perez, Field Notes February 19th 2014). Others also said that they made decisions together, such as what to buy for the children. In Olga’s case she identifies a need, shares it with her husband and the two of them combine their money and decide how to spend it. Unfortunately I had no way of observing this decision-making process in action, and the answers about egalitarian relationships could have been said for the benefit of my host sisters, when they were with me.

All of the women that I asked said that they needed their husbands’ permission to go to meetings. In fact when the husbands are home the women asked permission to leave the house period; this evidence would seem to be contrary to the previously expressed decision-making equality. This did not bother any of the three women with whom I had in depth conversations on this topic, or Maria’s grown daughter who was sitting in and translating during that particular interview. It simply is the way things are done. No one ever mentioned being denied permission for the meetings, and all said that their husbands were in favor of their membership in *Las*
Maria also said that, as her husband is not often home, she leaves without his permission because he is not there to be asked (Field Notes February 27th 2014).

Conclusions

The women I talked to already enjoyed a certain degree of economic autonomy, as most of them were responsible for identifying and filling the families’ needs. This autonomy has increased with the increased earning power that comes with their participation in Las Mujeres Mayas. On an individual level the knowledge shared among the women in meetings seems to have raised the women’s self-esteem and familial prestige at the same time as it has increased their earning power. The families’ claims that decision making has become more equal in the wake of the women’s participation represents a seismic change in family dynamics if it is able to be verified in the future. I did not have enough time to simply observe familial interactions in order to compare them with claims made in interviews. However even if the claims are not true in practice, they represent a change in discourse on gender equality. The families are aware that the organization’s representatives expect an egalitarian family relationship; at least some of the leadership’s feminist mission is filtering through to the members’ families, although at this time it is unfortunately unclear to what extent this is true.

The fact that women must ask their husbands’ permission to leave the house points to a lack of equality in the households’ power dynamics, although Maria’s case indicates that there is some limited female autonomy even in this situation. Like al-Dajani, I do not believe that the female employment in the area I have studied constitutes a direct challenge to patriarchy. It seems to be increasing female autonomy and self-awareness in subtle ways, but it is not a radical break from the way these families operated prior to the existence of Las Mujeres Mayas. In Menjívar’s concluding remarks she claims that “earning an income among women who feel
pressed to work is more a reflection of the men's (and women's) tenuous position in the labor market rather than the women's independence. Under these conditions, paid work both in the United States and in Guatemala does not automatically ‘benefit’ women,” (Menjívar 2006: 101).

This is not to say that the women do not benefit from being able to feed their children, or from learning and sharing with other women during the meetings. The shift in discourse represented by Jose’s claim of greater decision-making equality could very well be having effects that I was unable to observe, and there were women who described their marriage as having always possessed an egalitarian dialogue. However from my research I must conclude that the women’s participation in Las Mujeres Mayas is an extension of a pre-existing familial economic strategy and does not seem to have substantially altered their domestic responsibilities or the power dynamics within their families.

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