

WOMEN'S INCOME GENERATING CO-OPERATIVES IN CHILE
AND THEIR ROLE IN BUILDING CONSCIOUSNESS
AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

BY



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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Social Work

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of participation in income generating co-operatives on the lives and on the political and feminist consciousness of low income women in Chile. The sample consists of 17 women, all living in one district of Santiago, Chile and includes members of breadmaking and artisanal co-ops.

The study employed a qualitative methodology, reflecting its exploratory nature. Data was gathered through taped interviews, using a two-tiered set of questions, first structured questions on age, income, marital and family status and education. This was followed by open ended questions to provide an in-depth interview on participation on a co-op.

The study suggests that the co-ops have had little impact in improving the economic conditions of participants, due to problems in marketing. Nevertheless the participants felt a deep sense of attachment to and identification with their co-op because of the support they receive from other members and the opportunities to experience new roles. The impact of participation in improving their status in the family and the community is uneven. Change in political and feminist consciousness is also uneven. However the

majority of participants expressed the view that as a consequence of participation they had become more aware of the political situation of the country and aware of their rights as women, as a consequence of participation. The study suggests income generating co-ops provide an important forum for low income women to learn and develop individually and as members of a group.

CHAPTER IOVERVIEW1.1 Introduction

Low income women in the Third World constitute one of the most oppressed categories of people. Together with men of their own class and economic condition, they are victims of exploitation, social discrimination and economic, cultural and social marginalization. However, as women, they suffer a double misery for they are also treated as subordinates and inferiors to men, even in the context of their own class, communities and families.

Beliefs in female inferiority and the subordinate status of women in the family and society are generally accepted around the world.⁽¹⁾ These beliefs are more visible in the Third World than in developed countries given the economic and social situation under which the great majority of people in the Third World live. Concepts such as women's exploitation are especially pervasive among the poor, who have little access to education and to diverse cultural

1 Eleanor Leacock, "Women, Development, and Anthropological Facts and Fictions," in Women in Latin America: An Anthology from Latin American Perspectives, Riverside, California: Latin American Perspectives, 1979.

inputs. For men who are themselves the victims of exploitation and who are treated as social inferiors, a belief in the inferior status of women is something to cling to fiercely as a consolation for their own misery and humiliation. Thus, low income women become the victims of victims, struggling against the perpetual crisis of poverty and scarcity at the bottom level of multi-layered systems of exploitation and brutality. (2)

If low income Third World women are among the most oppressed of people, they are also among the most voiceless and unrepresented. Democracy is a scarce commodity in much of the Third World, and genuine democratic process, that allows for grass roots participation, is even more rare. The poor, both men and women, are generally badly represented in the priorities and policies of Third World governments, especially in the case of regimes that base their power on military might. Elitist and undemocratic regimes often promote attitudes of sexism and racism, both as a reflection of an ideology of power and as a strategy for dividing and weakening possible opponents. (3)

2 Leacock.

3 June Nash, "A Decade of Research on Women in Latin America," in Women and Change in Latin America, ed. June Nash and Helen Safa and contributors, Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1986.

Low income women also tend not to be well represented in movements for social change in the Third World. Class based movements for social reform and/or revolutionary change remain dominated by men. The "equality of men and women", at its most abstract, has gained acceptance as a positive or "correct" value in most liberation or progressive reform movements. However, this has done little to change the composition of these movements, particularly at the level of leadership. It also seems to have done little to change the attitudes of men who are involved in attempting to effect social and political change, except at the most superficial and abstract level. Thus, in the struggle for new social orders, men who are still influenced by sexist attitudes and beliefs, become the advocates on behalf of low income women.

There has been a growing level of involvement by Third World women, both in broader social movements and in the specific struggle for the liberation of women. However, feminist movements in the Third World, as has been the experience in developed countries, tend to be composed of, and dominated by, women who are middle-class and/or professionals. This has meant that feminist movements in Third World countries have generally failed to involve the overwhelming majority of women. This is one of the reasons, though by no means the only one, that these movements have

had so much less impact in effecting social, political and cultural change than have their counterparts in developed countries.(4)

While feminist movements in developed countries have also tended to be dominated by women of the middle-class, there are working class elements whose particular interests and perspectives have had some influence. Women active in trade union movements, for example, advance the concerns of women within unions and at the same time, advance the particular concerns of working women within feminist movements. Unionization of working women in the Third World remains rare, so that Third World working class women are generally denied this medium for developing organizational skills and experience and the confidence to participate in other organizations.

Thus, just as sexist men become the advocates for social and political change on behalf of both women and men, middle-class and educated women become the advocates of 'women's interests', on behalf of themselves and low income women.(5) This can have even more distorting effects in a

4 Julieta Kirkwood, "Feminismo y Participacion Politica en Chile," in La Otra Mitad de Chile, ed. M. Angelica Meza, Santiago, Chile: Centro de Estudios Sociales Ltda, 1986.

5 Kirkwood.

Third World context than it would in a developed country. Class divisions tend to be more explicitly drawn in the Third World, and attitudes of class superiority extend to include the middle-class and the formally well educated. The gulf, therefore, between middle-class and low income women in the Third World can be very wide. Often the only contact is through an employer-servant relationship. This can make for highly paternalistic attitudes on the part of the middle-class, especially when they believe themselves to be acting on behalf of the poor.

The lack of participation of low income women in both wider political struggles and feminist movements is largely due to the very factors which make their participation so necessary. Belief about the inferiority and subordinate status of women define very narrow parameters for the lives of women. They are less likely than men of their own class to have access to formal education. They will be expected to live out their lives in the narrow confines of the home and the immediate community, acting out traditional routines. If they attempt to break free of these restrictions they can expect violent repression by husbands, fathers and others who embrace traditional values and conceptions about the role of women in the family.

The poverty of their lives also becomes an obstacle to change and development. One West African woman describes her life in the following way: She rises well before dawn to buy and cook meat. Then she spends the rest of the day attempting to sell the cooked meat in the streets. Afterward, she returns home to prepare dinner for her children and to clean the house. She doesn't go to bed until a few hours before she has to rise and repeat the process another time, and all to keep her family alive at the barest level. She says she must keep working until her children are old enough to survive without her. (6)

Conditions such as these narrow the scope of women's lives. They have no opportunity to be exposed to new ideas nor time and energy to reflect on them. More importantly, an endless cycle of poverty, crisis and exhausting labour breeds despair that can shatter the spirit and kill the imagination.

This thesis is premised on the view that it is vital that low income women in the Third World become active participants in the struggle for the liberation of women and in the wider struggle for social justice for both women and men. Without their involvement, feminist movements in

6 Kenna Owoh, "Selling Akara", in CUSO Journal: The Informal Economy, December 1987, p. 29.

the Third World will remain politically weak and irrelevant to the needs and concerns of the majority of women. Beyond the question of the contribution low income women could make at a political or macro level, there is also the need for low income women to liberate themselves from oppressive family and social relationships based on ideologies of male superiority. To challenge traditional roles and relationships low income women in the Third World must have the opportunity to explore new models and have the support and active solidarity of other women.

Efforts to raise consciousness and to mobilize low income Third World women must begin by addressing basic needs, such as ensuring economic insecurity. Projects and activities which bring women together to collectively resolve economic problems should be viewed as effective, if not the most effective, vehicles for building consciousness among low income women.

I stress the 'collective' aspect since a characteristic of most Third World economies is a large informal sector where women are very active. The informal sector can be defined as economic activity which generates only a subsistence income and which therefore does not allow for investment to increase productivity or to grow. The tendency for every economic activity in Third World informal sectors to be

overcrowded with participants results in the value of labour being driven down, so that even a subsistence income requires excessive hours of work. Women perform various functions in the informal sector: street vending; preparing and selling food; dress making; taking in laundry; and making or preparing and vending goods such as soap or charcoal.

The work performed by women in the informal sector is of vital importance to the formal sector, from which women are largely excluded. Just as the work of women in the home contributes to capitalist accumulation by making it possible to reproduce the labour force at a much lower wage, the informal sector makes it possible for the very poor to have access to a variety of necessary goods and services.

Participation in the informal sector, like wage employment in the formal sector, does establish women as income earners and therefore may help to elevate their status within the family. However, most informal sector activity is entrepreneurial and this has an atomizing effect, placing women in competition with each other. Co-operative efforts to resolve common economic problems may, on the other hand, offer women the potential to move as a group from

addressing immediate economic needs to addressing wider social and political issues.

The co-operative process also offers women a vehicle for meeting, for sharing their experiences and perhaps through this, for promoting intellectual and emotional growth among themselves. It may provide a support base for encouraging women to explore new roles for themselves within the family and the community. It can perhaps also serve as a training ground for learning to solve problems and make decisions collectively, thus building confidence and leadership and organizational skills.

In my study, I will use women's income generating co-operatives in Chile as an example, arguing that participation in the co-operatives has played an important role in changing participants' images of themselves, providing them with greater confidence and strength in challenging traditional conceptions of the role of women in the family, community and society.

1.2 Description of the Study

In the current political situation in Chile low income women have been forced to take on a greater role than in the past in meeting the basic needs of families and even

their communities as a whole. While women have not been immune to political violence by the military regime, men have been the major targets. This has meant that many women have become the sole support of their families after their husbands have been killed, imprisoned, relegated (sent into internal exile to a remote region of Chile for a period of three months) or disappeared.

The economic and social policies of the military regime have also forced women to take on a more active role outside of the home. Following a rigid monetarist philosophy, the regime eliminated tariffs on imported goods. This has resulted in the closure of factories producing basic consumer goods such as shoes, textiles and clothes, electrical appliances and others. At the same time the regime has severely cut back on social spending, on health care, education, and social services. Thousands of professionals in service fields have been thrown out of work, joining those unemployed by the closure of factories. The destruction of social service systems has also made the poor and the unemployed even more vulnerable and desperate. (7)

7 Luis Vitale. La Formacion Social Latino Americana (1930-1978), Barcelona: Ed. Fontamara S.A., 1979, pp. 172-177.

Women have had to respond to this situation in a number of ways. Many seek an individual solution. There is little work available for women who lack formal education other than waitressing and domestic work in the homes of the rich and the middle-class. With a surplus of women in desperate need of some form of income, the price of domestic and service labour is reduced and women can be subjected to the most extreme exploitation. Other women participate in the informal sector as street vendors or by taking in laundry or dress making. According to the opposition press in Chile, prostitution is increasing.(8)

Other women respond through collective action, organizing communal kitchens to feed their families and forming production co-operatives to generate income. For many of them, this experience is in marked contrast to their past lives, representing their first involvement outside the home. Because of the relatively short history of most co-

8 "Protestan las Prostitutas". in Analisis, No. 213. February, 1988. There are in Chile several magazines run by the opposition to the dictatorship which are able to operate on a regular basis. They are, however, shut down during periods of State of Siege and staff of these publications are often harrassed and even kidnapped and murdered. These publications have close relations with organizations of the opposition, including the Alternative Development Organizations and P.E.T. (Programa de Economia del Trabajo, an alternative Chilean social research organization), which gives them access to unofficial and statistical information. The best known of these magazines are Analisis, Apsi, Hoy, Fortin Mapocho and Cauce. (See Bibliography.)

operatives and other self-help groups, the Chilean experience provides an interesting case for attempting to assess the impact of participation on the lives and attitudes of women.

The study will seek input from low income women who are active in income generating co-operatives, in order to assess the impact participation has had on other aspects of their lives, and on their image of themselves.

This study is an exploratory effort, intended to offer initial themes which could provide the theoretical basis for future studies.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to provide a better understanding of the role that self help organizations play in building consciousness among low income women. Consciousness will be understood, in the context of this study, to mean an awareness of one's own economic and social condition in relation to the wider political, social and economic situation, and, importantly, the willingness to translate political and social values into action.(9)

9 Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 19th edition, New York: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 1983.

The study also seeks to increase awareness and understanding in the following areas:

- a) Self-help organizations in Canada - The use of self-help groups as a medium for building participation may have relevance in Canada in breaking patterns of alienation, despair and isolation which characterize the lives of the very poor. There is much that self-help organizations in Canada and those working with them could learn from the Chilean example.

There is a growing but still insufficient literature on the subject of popular organizations in Chile but very little of this literature is focussed on women and even less is directed at audiences outside of Chile. This study can help to make this subject more accessible to non-Chileans, thus increasing the potential for others to learn from the experiences of groups in Chile.

- b) The Women Themselves - Through the interviews the study seeks to encourage the participants to engage in a critical analysis of their experience as members of a co-op and to reflect on their role as women in Chilean society today. The interviews also provide

participants with a forum to articulate their views and experiences.

- c) Chilean Alternative Development Organizations - Many Chilean non-government organizations, or Alternative Development Organizations (A.D.O.'s) as they are called in Chile, see the promotion of critical consciousness among members of grass roots groups as an important aspect of their work. While they have other tools for evaluating the effectiveness of their work, this study could be useful to animators and popular educators working with A.D.O.'s. A summary of this study will be produced in Spanish and made available to both the participants and Chilean A.D.O.'s working with women's co-ops.

To my knowledge, other than the book *Scraps of Life* by Marjorie Agosin,(10) there is no publication in English on this theme. Therefore, this study may help to make more people in Canada aware of the work that is being done in Chile and thus contribute to building the solidarity support needed by Chilean Alternative

10 Marjorie Agosin, SCRAPS OF LIFE, trans. Cola Franzen, Toronto: Williams-Wallace Publishers, 1987. This book was written in Spanish and translated into English. It is about women who make arpilleras.

Development Organizations and grass roots groups such as the women's co-ops.

- d) Canadian Non-Government Development Organizations-
- Many Canadian development organizations are now directing their assistance to grass roots groups, including women's income generating co-operatives. This assistance is often channeled through indigenous non-government organizations such as the Alternative Development Organizations in Chile. This approach to development work, in some cases, reflects the view that underdevelopment is primarily a problem of maldistribution of wealth and power, calling for greater political participation and action at the grass roots level. Strengthening community and membership based groups among the very poor is seen as a way of providing people with structures through which they can gain organizational and leadership skills, as well as greater confidence in their capacity to effect change through collective action. This study can provide Canadian development organizations which have made this choice in development methodology with more information and insights into the types of groups they are supporting.

e) Social Work - The issue being explored in this study is the role of income generating co-ops as vehicles for "conscientization", to use the term introduced by the Brazilian popular educator, Paulo Freire.(11) As James Midgley notes in his book on social work practice and education in the Third World:

The techniques which are inherent in the process of conscientization are not dis-similar to those of social work or community development but, unlike social work, the focus is not introspective and the purpose is very different. Instead of helping people make a better adjustment to their circumstances, conscientization gives insights so that people can change their circumstances.(12)

This study can perhaps provide a model for one strategy in the radical approach to social work, focussed on empowering disadvantaged groups and providing them, to paraphrase Midgley, with insights so that they can change their circumstances. The experience of the women's co-ops in Chile could be shared with groups in Canada also attempting to overcome conditions of disadvantage.

The study may also provide insights into approaches to working with economically disadvantaged women, contributing

11 Freire.

12 James Midgley, Professional Imperialism: Social Work in the Third World, London: Heinemann, London, 1981, p.144.

to the articulation of a feminist approach to social work. While the study looks at women in a different country, there are many parallels between the situation of low-income women in Chile and the situations of native and immigrant women in Canada.

Finally, the study can enrich the social work profession and social work education by providing an example of how people in a different country and culture, living under very different economic, social and political conditions, deal with problems. Canada is becoming increasingly more multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-racial. To respond to this social workers must develop greater cross-cultural capabilities and this requires, among other things, more familiarity and appreciation of other societies, the problems people face in those societies and the way they address those problems.

As well, the changing ethnic and cultural composition of Canada demands that social workers be more flexible and imaginative in order to respond to new needs and conditions. Exposure to approaches to working with disadvantaged groups in other societies can broaden and enrich the understanding and capabilities of social workers. Hopefully, this study can contribute to this process.

CHAPTER IIBACKGROUND INFORMATION

This background discussion covers three areas which can contribute to an understanding of the role of the women's co-operatives and their influence in the lives of their members. The first is the political situation in Chile, providing the background to the present conditions which have forced women to seek ways to generate income and offer one another support. The second is the Popular Economic Organizations, or O.E.P.'s as they are called in Spanish, of which the women's co-operatives are one example. Discussion of the O.E.P.'s places the women's co-ops in a wider framework of popular responses to present conditions in Chile. The third area is the Political Participation of Women in Chile. This will provide a basis for discussing change in political awareness and participation among low income women in Chile today.

2.1 The Political Situation of Chile

One of the features that distinguished Chile from most other Latin American countries was a long history of democratic government and relative political stability. With the exception of a brief intervention by a military

regime in the 1930's, Chile had elected governments, with a division of power between the executive, legislature and judiciary, for more than a hundred years. The franchise was gradually extended over a period of time to include all income levels, illiterates and women, so that by 1949 there was universal adult suffrage. Under these conditions trade unions and political parties representing the working class were able to organize themselves and make significant advances.

In 1970 a socialist government was elected, with Salvador Allende as president. The Allende government implemented a series of economic and social reforms, affecting all levels of society. Many of these reforms attacked the economic power of Chilean elites and foreign multinational corporations. Large agricultural estates were taken over and the land distributed to peasants or peasant run co-operatives.(13) The copper mining industry was fully nationalized and the former owners, two major American mining corporations, were paid no compensation in view of what the Allende government regarded as decades of extracting excessive profits.(14) There were also reforms to make health care and education more accessible for the

13 Paul Sigmund, The Overthrow of Allende and the Politics of Chile, 1964-1976, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977, pp. 139-140.

14 Sigmund, pp. 141-142.