

Lindsay Dowdle  
Rethinking Globalization  
12/5/03

## **Women's Cooperatives: at the Foundation with Hope**

Situations of oppression surround every person in every place throughout the world. Sometimes the oppressor is far away in the form of a large corporation making decisions that will impact citizens in a far away land. Sometimes oppression can be found in the way a boss treats an employee. Oppression can be the way spouses interact with one another or one country exploiting another for resources, capital, or simple power. For the abundance of oppression in this world we rarely encounter two things: the real stories and faces of those who have been oppressed and any possibility for a solution to this widespread problem. The problem with the nature of oppression is that the oppressors hold the power and therefore keep the pain of those oppressed individuals and the possibilities of remedies, a secret.

There are many people worldwide, however, who have names and faces, and stories of oppression. There are also a handful of suggestions for change and there are some living that example. All over the world neighbors, families and friends are joining together in many different ways to try to combat the global oppression of citizens of developing nations. One theme I have seen over and over again is groups of women coming together to try and increase their income by selling traditional crafts to an international fair trade market. This enables the women to get a fair price for their work and a possible avenue out of their history of oppression.

Women's artisan groups have been emerging throughout the world with similar goals but springing from a variety of situations. These groups, despite similar goals, go

about accomplishing these goals in a range of ways and with varying success. Standing in the way of their successes can be a lot of things, from government resistance, to societal resistance, group organization and dynamics, the presence or lack of business skills or training, the geography of the land, social expectations of female gender roles and the simple reality of being a woman in an oppressed culture.

Unidos Para Vivamos Mejor (UPAVIM) is an artisan group in Guatemala City, Guatemala that began making crafts in 1991 to pay for a program that would monitor the health of growing babies. As the success of selling their crafts continued they were able to add more programs and that is how the group has continued until this day. Since their beginnings in the early nineties the UPAVIM women have grown in numbers from eight to over sixty and their programs help people throughout the community. They now have a bakery, scholarship programs, the healthy baby program, tutoring, a child care center, health center, pharmacy and a dentist a couple of days a week. They are also in the process of extending current programs and installing a soy production facility, a typing classroom for high school students and the opportunity for elders to come to a safe gathering place and give them the opportunity to do work at their own pace for extra money. This group is an amazing success story with all it has managed to accomplish in just over ten years. Other women's groups have a similar struggle toward similar goals.

The Godavari Delta Lace Cooperative officially began in 1979 and presently has a membership of about six hundred women. They have struggled against many factors hindering their success. There is the societal view of women being unequal to men and traditional relationships of exploitation that need to be overcome. These factors have been very debilitating to the efforts of these women to break free from their

traditional role as the oppressed. The important thing, however, is their resilience and efforts to continue to pursue this goal.

Another example of a group of women coming joining together in an attempt to fight global economic oppression is the Solola weaving group in the highlands of Guatemala. They began in 1982 and in their early years were advised in how to create a board of directors. This helped them to elect people from their group to help them accomplish their goals of better health, subsistence living, better education and providing for their children. They joined with a group called Maya Traditions, which helps to market their weavings to an international market. As a result of the cohesiveness of their group and the quality of their work they have been able to do a lot for themselves and their community.

The women of Solola have organized as a formal cooperative and therefore are eligible for government trainings and programs on top of those they have created for themselves. They received a loan to buy land that they are now paying back with 10% of the sales of every weaving. This land will enable them to grow their own food as well as extra to sell in the markets. Maya Traditions helped them create a scholarship program that sends some dedicated children to secondary school, only requiring those lucky students to come back to the community and teach valuable skills like reading and Spanish. Maya Traditions also introduced them to a program of traditional healing for the more common ailments. As a result of their organization into a cooperative these women are now healthier, more educated and closer to their goal of being self-sustaining.

In Nepal there is a rigid caste system that not only assigns people relative levels of importance but on top of that sees women as unequal to men. There are people who are

working to combat those feelings of oppression and the economic ones of that area of that area as well. These are women from the Association of Craft Producers in Nepal (ACPN). The ACPN began in 1983 and is now comprised of over 800 low caste women. Their primary seller and income generator is high-end knitwear but they produce many things and are always interested in learning more skills and creating different goods.

As a result of their size, organization and diligence, the ACPN has been very successful in implementing programs for themselves as well as the greater social good. The programs that the ACPN have made as priorities indicate some of the original goals of the group. They have a producers benefit program which consists of a savings and loan opportunities, a retirement fund, and a bonus program. They have a female child education fund, health services, peer counseling, legal counseling and a fair price shop. This shows the women's commitment to the care of their group as well as other women that may eventually be marginalized. These women have made courageous and successful attempt at combating the oppressive combination of being low caste and a woman in a country that is subjected to oppression as well.

These groups, although situated all over the world, have many similarities and face similar struggles. An organization of women in societies that are often male dominated is one of the major obstacles in the organization process. For societies that are accustomed to the traditional gender relationships of men working for money and women working in the home, a fairly huge adjustment is required. Men who see women staying in the home and making more money or even women organizing into a cooperative and reaping the benefits, can become jealous. The most extreme case of inability to adjust that I encountered was a man in Chiapas, Mexico. He was unable to deal with his wife

earning more and the subsequent lifestyle changes that that entailed. He killed her. This adjustment is harder for some cultures than others depending on how women have traditionally been viewed. Communication is necessary, however, for revolutionizing gender roles otherwise this barrier can be a huge obstacle for women in their attempts to organize.

Beyond the obstacle of gender roles, a lot seems to stand in the way of women all over the world as they attempt to organize against oppression. Many women in these groups and in the communities have health problems. From malnutrition, to stomach problems, depression and alcoholism are all health problems that can be easily found in countries that have been subjected to years of systematic oppression.

Health problems exist in every society but developing nations are left with few resources to help them overcome such an obstacle. The same goes with natural disasters. These women's groups have to deal with the oppressive forces of society and those of the environment. The Godavari Delta Lace Cooperative lost everything to flood in 1986, from which they are still trying to recover. They, like other groups around the world hit by natural disasters, are left at square one to rebuild all that they have been working for.

Natural disasters can be physically debilitating to groups but the lack of education can be structurally debilitating as well. Many women as a result of social gender roles, or economic restrictions do not have very much formal education. In one weaving group in Guatemala this problem cost the group a lot of progress. There were only a few women who could speak good Spanish and read so they were begrudgingly elected every year to be the board of directors. This prevented the group from being a true cooperative as there was a sense of hierarchy that the women felt that had no control over.

Education is one of the goals that I have seen in every woman's cooperative I have researched. Many groups provide scholarships to youths in hopes that with a better education these youths will overcome some of the hardships they have faced. Many groups have tutoring within the cooperative and as a result of these cooperatives many more women have learned how to read, write, speak English or Spanish, have learned how to use computers and increased their feelings of self-esteem and independence.

These obstacles combine to create a very arduous task for women trying to join together to fight social, economic and physical oppression but as can be seen above, women all over the world have taken all these in stride and created a more positive reality for themselves. These realities include an increased sense of independence, increased self esteem, feelings of being equal to men and those of other cultures, new skills, better health, better education, education for their children, an added sense of community and solidarity with other women. As a UPAVIM member told me "UPAVIM in the middle of all this strife is like an oasis, a space to find moral support, a place to educate children with positive thoughts and protection from physical abuse...A space where the potential of the women is valued, where they begin to feel important and where feelings of machismo are trying to be eliminated."

These groups provide an example to those all over the world facing oppressive situations. Despite a world of domination, exploitation and cruelty these women offer an example of hope, compassion, and service. It seems ironic that these women in developing nations, women who face so many hardships, daily, are the ones who are able to come up with a solution to all of these problems. These women live in a world that rewards consumption, exploitation, and individual profit gain, yet they come together in

groups and do just the opposite. They have goals of providing for their families, the community, increasing the education of their people, improving the health and simply offering hope to those that will pay attention. The strength and courage of these women are things that those in the position of the oppressor try to keep us from seeing, but if we take the time to look we can learn and feel the hope that these women have struggled so hard to create.

Lindsay Dowdle  
Rethinking Globalization  
Dick Meyer

Godavari Delta Women Lace Artisans Co-operative. Publication date unknown. 13 November 2003. <<http://www.fairtradefederation.org/membio/godavar.html>>.

Grimes, Kimberly M., and B. Lynne Milgram, eds. *Artisans & Cooperatives: Developing Alternative Trade for the Global Economy*. Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 2000.

Grimes, Kimberly M. Letter to the author. 4 December 2003.

Sadhna. Publication date unknown. 13 November 2003.  
<<http://www.sevamandir.org/Sadhna/index.htm>>.

UPAVIM. Letter to the author. 8 December 2003.

UPAVIM. Publication date unknown. 13 November 2003. <<http://www.upavim.org/>>.

Weave. Publication date unknown. 13 November 2003.  
<<http://www.weave-women.org/>>.