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The Empowering Effects of Cooperative Development Among Indigenous Women in Southern Mexico

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Historical Context

On January 1, 1994, the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN), often referred to as the Zapatistas, instituted an armed struggle against the Mexican government. The rebellion coincided with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was viewed as the culmination of several years of neoliberal restructuring in Mexico that marginalized rural and indigenous populations. Seizing towns and burning government installations in Chiapas, the southernmost and poorest state in Mexico, the Zapatistas soon succumbed to the overwhelming firepower of the Mexican army. The remaining liberation fighters, almost all indigenous and many of them women, fled into the surrounding jungle.

Subsequently, a local Roman Catholic Bishop, Samuel Ruiz, intervened. He and the charismatic Zapatista spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos, worked to focus international publicity on the Zapatista movement and ensure its survival to the present time. In return for laying down their arms, the Zapatistas have been allowed to, in effect, control territory in remote regions in Chiapas. Their efforts to create what they call a “good government,” free from what they see as the corruption, racism, and sexism of existing Mexican institutions, is a living example of the revolutionary slogan, “another world is possible.”

Zapatista-controlled territories serve as a kind of laboratory of what life could be like outside the domain of neoliberalism. Although the concept has been variously defined, in a broad sense neoliberalism refers to a “politically guided intensification of market rule and commodification” (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010, p. 184). In fighting “neoliberalism,” the Zapatistas, like other indigenous groups, are fighting against the domination of the world’s economic system by corporate, free market capitalism (Nash, 2001). More than being against a government or a political structure, the Zapatista rebellion is about a new kind of political subject, a space where everyone is included in a free and democratic society (Popke, 2004).

The world the Zapatistas are putting into effect is the opposite of big business and big government; it is small scale, communitarian, sharing, and cooperative. Zapatistas emphasize the rights of women and indigenous peoples. A small, but important, element of this new world is the proliferation of the cooperative model of small-scale economic development among indigenous women that is now taking place in Zapatista-controlled territories and beyond. It is within this context that the design of this study was born. Understanding the influence of this proliferation of Zapatista-influenced cooperatives for women in the surrounding areas is the goal of the current study.

Mexico

Until the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), rural communities in Mexico survived through subsistence agriculture grown on sprawling estates, or haciendas, owned by a foreign and domestic elite ruling class. The economic viability of the hacienda system was made possible through the indentured labor of the country's peasant population, or *campesinos*. The Revolution prioritized land reform and changed the social system. By the 1930s, ownership of much of the farmland was transferred to the *campesinos* to own in common in collective farms called *ejidos*. Helped by government grants, loans, and price supports, the *campesinos* were able to make a living on their own land.

Much of this *ejido* system, however, has been dismantled in the last 25 years due to the pressures of globalization and international agreements, such as NAFTA, entered into by the Mexican government (Fernández-Kelly & Massey, 2007; McCarty, 2008). The first blow was an elimination of price supports and a drastic reduction of government aid to the *ejido* farmers. The second was the opening of the Mexican agriculture market to American agribusiness, which could sell corn in Mexico for less money than it cost the *ejido* farmer to produce it. Millions of subsistence farmers who were unable to sell their corn could sell their *ejido* land due to this change in the Mexican Constitution. Many gave up, sold out, and drifted to other regions as hired workers or to urban areas, where they live in poverty, without the education and skills necessary in the global economy (McCarty & Altemose, 2010).

Although this process happened throughout Mexico, it was met in Chiapas with politically motivated violence that drove many *campesinos*, even those allied with the Zapatistas, off their land. At that time, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) had controlled Mexico for 70 years. Its state and local representatives, in particular the large landowners, reacted to the Zapatista rebellion with fury. They funded a campaign of intimidation by *paramilitaries*, internally displacing thousands of people and culminating in the 1997 Acteal village massacre of 45 unarmed members of *Las Abejas*, a local civil association associated with the Zapatistas (Moksnes, 2004). Such violence, and the resulting displacement, led to extreme poverty and marginalization for many women and their families. As the authors will demonstrate, these circumstances also led to the formation of cooperative enterprises, which now serve as an integral part of these women's economic and social lives.

Cooperatives as an Alternative

Cooperatives offer a radically different approach to the neoliberal assumption that work means selling one's labor to somebody else. Instead,

people work together, pool their resources, and share equally and democratically in the work, profits, and decision making of the group (Eber, 1999; King, Adler, & Grieves, 2013; McLaren, 2008). The group succeeds or fails together, which means the members are incentivized to help each other do well. Members are simultaneously supported by and accountable to the group. Outside investment in the cooperative model is important; however, it generally takes the form of a grant, a revolving fund, or other similar low-interest investment from a NGO or nonprofit. This model, however, differs significantly from microfinance, which has been the source of critique by feminist scholars as the opposite of an empowering and emancipatory opportunity for women in the developing world (e.g. Bee, 2011; Rankin, 2002; Worthen, 2012).

Much of the literature on women-led cooperatives in developing countries seems to take for granted the assumption that the purpose of work in general is to make money. If that were true, it would follow that the purpose of cooperatives is to make money, and therefore the cooperative movement should be judged primarily on the basis of financial success. Even the literature on fair trade, which in theory lessens the likelihood of exploitation of cooperative workers by local and global markets (Wohlgemuth, 2014), is focused on improving the probability of the financial success of the cooperative.

The need for a broader and more structural examination of the influence of cooperatives is not new. While the “socio-political dimension” in which cooperatives operate can create a system that supports participation, equality, and solidarity among the members, these characteristics are frequently overshadowed by a focus on a profit margin as the measure of success (King et al., 2013). Much research on cooperatives in developing nations has been devoted to the “business end” of developing a cooperative: grants and loans, marketing, inventory, and sales. The need for raw materials, space for production, and means of distribution has also been studied (Sapovadia & Patel, 2013; Torri & Martinez, 2014; Wohlgemuth, 2014).

Using financial success to measure the worth of women-owned cooperatives, however, leads to discouraging and primarily negative results (Sapovadia & Patel, 2013; Torri & Martinez, 2014). At best, those cooperatives that do make significant profits benefit primarily those within the community who already have significant resources, not those in most need of political and economic empowerment (Stephen, 2005). Even those studies that attempt to measure important goals other than financial have found little hard evidence that women-led cooperatives in developing nations are effective (Mayoux, 1995; Trivedi, Priyan, & Bhinde, 2011).

It is time again to push for a broader examination of the potential for cooperatives, one that further challenges our evaluation methods and rethinks our sampling methods. One possibility is to focus specifically on cooperatives that are generally seen as “successful” in whatever ways the participants themselves define success. The Zapatistas are intensely proud of their movement, and this includes pride in the women-run cooperatives in Zapatista lands and the adjacent territory (Figure 1). The current phenomenological study is an effort to highlight a successful partnership model rooted in a unique international and rural context. As we will demonstrate, the cooperative models employed in Zapatista communities are not only working but they are also an integral part of the alternative world they are building, a world in which indigenous peoples and women, in particular, are valued and included.



Figure 1. Map of Chiapas.

Methods

Sample and Setting: The Cooperatives Selected and Zapatismo

The Zapatista uprising, rebellion, and continuing attempts to create a way of life inside Mexico but outside of the control of the Mexican government is unique. While Zapatistas encourage attempts to learn and understand their lived experience, they do not promote their model to others, other than their hope that it encourages others to create their own critical analysis for a better world (Callahan, 2005). Nevertheless, while the Zapatistas have

purposely isolated themselves from the Mexican government, they are not isolated from the surrounding communities. Zapatista influence, sometimes recognized and sometimes not, can be seen in the practices and organization of cooperatives and in the altered role of indigenous women in the surrounding communities.

After receiving institutional approval from the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, this study focused on four cooperatives, one located in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico, and the others in the rural surrounding areas. These four cooperatives are: *Abejas de Acteal*; *Collective Siempre Viva*; *Collective Tsovotec Ta a Vtel*; and *Mujeres y Maíz*. The collectives selected produce traditional artisan work, basic food staples, natural personal care products, and herbal medicines. Using a snowball sampling technique, the investigator identified prospective interview participants from the original contacts made through a key informant. Once accepted into the first community, the investigator was recommended to the other participating communities via personal recommendations after a measure of initial trust was established. Overall, 19 women participated in the formal interviews, 4 individually and the others in small group settings. Ages ranged from early 20s to early 50s, and the majority of participants self-identified as *Tzotzil* and *Tzeltal*, indigenous identities that make up about 71% of the indigenous population in Chiapas (Linares, 2008).

Of the four cooperatives represented, two had direct working relationships with Zapatista cooperatives, and all had practices modeled on the Zapatista movement. For example, in one of the cooperatives represented here, any woman wanting to join the group must state if she is affiliated in any way with the Mexican government. Modeling the autonomous stance of the Zapatistas, any official relationship with the government disqualifies her from membership in the cooperative.

Although Zapatista women were a part of this study, Zapatista leaders asked that, for reasons of security, no information from interviews or participant observations of women currently living in Zapatista communities be included in these research findings. All quotations, therefore, are from members of communities not officially affiliated with the Zapatistas. However, many of the women from non-Zapatista communities who have been quoted formerly lived in Zapatista communities, and Zapatista thought and practices (*Zapatismo*) has profoundly influenced even those women who have themselves never lived in such communities.

The Zapatista influence includes the revolutionary changes in the way family life and child rearing is organized. One cooperative in the study, for example, has adopted "*Alternativa Tzotzil*," an alternative, grassroots

form of education that uses Zapatista curriculum in social science and history classes and gives children much more freedom in the learning process. But the most notable Zapatista influence is the profound change in gender roles and expectations (Belausteguigoitia, 2000).

Before the Zapatista uprising, the role of indigenous *campesina* women had changed little in 500 years; it was the men who cleared the fields, planted the corn, participated in the public life of the community, and made the decisions. Women did “women’s work,” were clearly subservient to the men, and had no public role outside of the home. The idea that women could organize themselves, meet outside the home without the participation and permission of their husbands, and make their own economic decisions was, literally, unthinkable (Speed, Hernández Castillo, & Stephen, 2006). From the beginning, the Zapatista movement advocated a much more equal role for women (Bayes & Kelly, 2001; Harvey, 1998; Olivera, 2005).

The Zapatista uprising has created a profound shift in the world view of both the community and the world. In an analysis of the writing of the Zapatista leader Marcos, Popke (2004) found that the victory of the Zapatistas has been that the rebellion, although militarily a loss, overturned a long-held historical sense of resignation. The community no longer believes in the inevitability of injustice nor accepts the role of “victim” for their community. In addition to this internal process and victory, Popke (2004) further argues that by making the Zapatista uprising such a purposeful public event, much of the public interest occurred exactly because the uprising gave a human face to a struggle of indigenous peoples long oppressed by a government and ruling class. The goal of the Zapatista movement was not to overthrow the government; it was a movement to open up the process, a democratic process, to a larger and larger number of people.

Data Collection

The overarching goal of this study is to explore the implications of an opening up of the democratic process for women in Zapatista communities and the surrounding areas in terms of its impact on formation of women-driven collectives through a phenomenological research approach. Empirical phenomenological research is utilized to describe the world-as-experienced by the participants of the inquiry as well as the situations and conditions of those experiences (Padgett, 2008; van Manen, 2002). Such an approach allows the researchers to uncover indigenous women’s lived experiences of cooperatives.

Initial data were collected during the summer of 2010 through qualitative interviews, participant observation, and reflective note-taking by a native Spanish speaker. Entry into these traditionally closed communities was achieved directly through the support of a key informant, a local indigenous woman who provides consultation and support to cooperative groups. However, it is important to note that this project was only possible through a five-year process of relationship and partnership development. Trust that this study would be beneficial to all parties had to be established among indigenous community members and local leaders before access was granted.

Community members provided housing for the investigator, helping with both access and with building trust and rapport. When not formally interviewing collective members, the investigator provided service to the community by working alongside the women in their production of items to be sold, providing childcare assistance, teaching Spanish in a local school, and participating in the day-to-day life of the community. Immediately after participating in these activities, the investigator also recorded notes of her participant observations.

All structured interviews were conducted in a relaxed and informal setting at a time and place chosen by the interviewee. The interviews lasted as long as the participant desired, ranging from one to two hours. After the investigator had built rapport and recorded demographic and technical data, all participants were asked the following open-ended question: "Please share your experience regarding organized collective work." Follow-up questions were used as needed.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and translated by the investigator who conducted the interviews and who is a native Spanish speaker. All fieldwork was conducted in Spanish. All quotations in the article are word-for-word from the translated and transcribed texts, though names have been changed or omitted. All quotes are distributed across the participant population, taking care not to over-represent any one participant. Within each finding, each quote represents a different participant.

To address the limitations inherent in qualitative research and to support the validity of the findings, a coauthor independently reviewed the data, providing an inter-rater reliability check, using the five-step method of qualitative analysis described by McCracken (1988) and Piercy (2015). Specifically, the coauthor began by observing the individual utterances from each transcript. Secondly, these observations were further developed within the context of the entire transcript. Third, the coauthor looked for

interconnected observations across many interviews. Fourth, the coauthor focused on a small number of patterns or themes that appeared to be the most significant and strongly supported in many or most of the interviews. Lastly, themes from the interviews were developed into findings (McCracken, 1988).

The quotes presented below also most accurately support data from participant observations and informal interviews. In addition, a two-year post-study follow-up interview in person in 2012 and a three-year post-study follow-up interview by phone and email in 2013 were utilized to triangulate each finding. Participants who were contacted reported that all collectives were still in operation (2012 and 2013 follow-up), and the data reported here were confirmed to be an accurate representation of the interviews conducted in 2010 (2013 follow-up).

Findings

Although the cooperatives began in response to forced internal displacement, the women established a solid level of connection and partnership through the development process and activities of each cooperative group. In doing so, they bridged their differences and created new space and new social and economic opportunities. Based on their responses to interview questions, their partnerships helped them to be stronger and less vulnerable to the harsh realities of economy, culture, and gender. Through partnerships, they could address their more immediate survival needs while also nurturing and sustaining opportunities to develop skills and expand gender roles beyond their family. Economic survival was their explicit goal; however, their responses below demonstrate a shift from survival for their families as seen as an individual family matter to one of a shared endeavor, a partnership among the women and among the groups of women.

The following quotations illustrate the following motivating factors: a) poverty and internal displacement, whether from violence or from economic factors, in forming and joining collectives; and b) the beginnings of how the cooperative work provided a venue for a diverse group of women, represented in the four distinct groups, to expand their roles and responsibilities in their communities.

Poverty and Displacement as Motivation

Collective Siempre Viva
Individual interview participant

Well, because of the massacre and being displaced we did not know how we would live and eat, and that is why the women got together and they organized and we work together. It is difficult, sadness in everything. Sadness because of the work that we did not know how to do. Sadness for the children. I was young when they died in Acteal in 1997, December 22. My mother had a lot of work with us, because we did not know if we would have food or not. We had no money, nothing. That is why my mother had so much to carry with, she had us. That is why it is harder for women to organize.

Group interview participant

When I was a little girl, my mother said we had to move to the city. We needed work so we could eat, that's why I live in San Cristóbal. I stayed here and have a family. With *Siempre Viva*, I get a little extra help.

Group interview participant

I was a teenager when my mother sent me from the countryside to the city to live with my cousin. I came here because we were very poor and I needed to work to help my family. I didn't have anything; I took care of a little boy and lived in his family's home for many years. Later on I worked in a day care and started to make friends and got involved in advocating for the community and organizing with other people from the day care who were active in social services.

Collective Abejas de Acteal

Individual interview participant

. . . [W]e started with artisan work after the conflict, the massacre. We were displaced, and we came here to "camp Acteal" before the massacre. When the massacre happened, we were displaced again. We could not leave, we could not work, we had a lot of fear, a lot of threats, and we could not go back to our lands to our coffee plantations. There was no way to get money. That is why the women looked to see what we could do. That is how we started artisan work, and we started slowly to buy material to start working. When we sold something, we would buy more material. That is how we started to work. When I started this work, I suffered a lot because when the massacre happened I was the only survivor of my family. My mother died, both of my brothers died, my niece, and my sister-in-law. That is why we started this artisan work. We did it crying and suffering a lot because we could not work well, because we lost our families. It

was hard. I was sick with sadness, but thanks to God, my peers and I are struggling to work. (Author note: Here and in other interviews, the issue of coffee plantations and the ownership of land was the initial target of the Zapatistas. The loss of these lands and crops by the indigenous community was a major impetus for the rebellion and the first lands to be “repatriated” were coffee plantations.)

Individual interview participant

It was very difficult because we were not able to go back to our land. We did not have money to buy food; most of the men had been killed by the paramilitary. We were being taught a lesson by the government. We were neutral when it came to the war between the federal government and Zapatistas. We are pacifist and do not use violence, yet the paramilitary massacred our village. We were so scared; we hid in the jungle for weeks. They used our village as an example of what would happen if anyone decided to side with the Zapatistas. It was all planned and the weapons used were issued by the government.

Collective Tsovotec Ta a Vtel

Individual interview participant

Our collective is formed by women from many municipalities and communities—we are all running this. We want our children to finish high school and attend university. That is why our families are struggling; we are working for our children. With what we make we can buy school supplies, registration fees, you know how things are in the city—very different from our communities. In the communities you don’t pay anything, but in the city our children have many expenses. Overall, the Indigenous people want to be taken into consideration. We do not want to be left behind. We are Indigenous and we work the land.

The participants did not shy away from talking about the severity of their poverty. Particularly after the investigator gained a measure of trust in the communities, the issues associated with poverty and extreme poverty became a constant theme. While the interviews were not focused on the implications of neoliberal policies specifically, they did come up indirectly in the discussions about land ownership, work, and food scarcity and here in the discussions about the costs and availability of staple foods.

Collective Tsovotec Ta a Vtel

Individual interview participant

My family moved to the city when I was young. We were looking for work, because what used to be ours was taken away. My grandfather worked his own land, enough to keep the family fed. By the time I was a young girl, the land was not ours. It belongs to a Ranchero. Now we worked the land for a rich man and his family without pay and without questions. We were allowed to live in a very small area with unproductive earth. When you are indigenous and do not speak Spanish well and are not used to the ways of the city, you are tricked and scared.

Group interview participant

We also have a hard time buying corn in times like these. Now the corn is very expensive. And when it is cheap it is rotten.

Group interview participant

We are trying to sell different foods such as tamales to help build up more customers. But corn is very expensive now; it was not always like that. We have so many places that sell *maseca* tortillas everywhere. That is not a traditional tortilla. We make fresh tortillas from corn. White, yellow, and blue corn! People like it more, but they are more expensive. These are real tortillas, delicious, not powder.

Group interview participant

I used to make tortillas to eat, but this is the first time I am making them to sell because the reality is that I don't have enough money to take care of my two children. We started making tortillas for sale through the *tiangis* (indigenous market). The idea is to make tortillas to sell to help each other economically and also for our consumption. That is how we are helping each other right now because we do not have a stable income. We live by the day. That is all we can do. My husband does not have a stable income either; we live by the day to try to help our children. We have two children that go to primary school.

Collective Mujeres Y Maiz

Group interview participant

Well, we started very slowly without any resources. We have been making tortillas for many years. I was raised making tortillas because that is what my mother does; she made tortillas every day for our consumption. Therefore, I was raised harvesting corn. I helped clean

the cornfields. The men plant, but once the cornfields begin to grow, then we begin to clean and take care of it. That is what we learned. My husband and I lived in a very small house on a ranch. We worked for the family. My husband died, and I had to move to the city to look for a job and take care of my children. Now, I, my two daughters, and my daughter-in-law sell tortillas at the *tianguis*.¹ This is how we eat and send my grandchildren to school.

All the women received some monetary or resource gain from being a part of the collective, but in purely economic terms, it would be hard to argue that the collectives studied were great successes. Yet despite the regional, educational, and class differences among the women participants, all the women interviewed were loyal to their collective and thought that they gained great benefits from their participation.

The women in the cooperatives, many for the first time, had an opportunity to participate in the public sphere, to have their voices heard outside of the narrow audience of their family, to participate in the decisions that affect their survival, to be leaders of organizations. They clearly value their collective interactions, their friendships, and their social support above individual monetary gain as what sustains them in the work, as evidenced in the following quotes.

Sustaining Factors

Collective Siempre Viva

Group interview participant

During all this time that we have been a collective, I do not think that economic profit has been one of our main reasons for doing this. Yes, it does help out at home for a few things but in reality not enough to live off. The benefit that has rescued us is our supporting friendship. Every time we meet to do the accounting, it is a little time for us to socialize. During the day, we all have work to do and activities. Since the majority of us live far apart, it is difficult to get somewhere and if we do visit it is only two or three of us. Since we have a set date to do the accounting, some of us bring a little bit of food to share. We take advantage of this time to speak a little bit about everything. We are able to coexist for a little while. It is a time of happiness. We share our ideas.

Group interview participant

¹ Local flea market.

We all receive the same amount (of money from sales). No one gets more or less than anyone. When we started, we would divide the money depending on how much product each member sold. We stopped doing that because sometimes some members didn't make any sales or just made one sale. We agreed to divide all gains equally because we are a group; there should not be any differences.

Group interview participant

Since we divide the money equally, we also ask that the work invested be equal. Sometimes some women forget some of their responsibilities because she has many things to do. We ask that everyone invest equal time.

Collective Mujeres y Maiz

Group interview participant

We only make enough to buy food for the day, diapers, sugar, and have enough money left over to buy what we need to make more tortillas the next day, to sell and to consume. There is no real economic gain; to do so we would need to buy corn and wood in very large quantities. We cannot afford to do so. Nonetheless we work together and survive each day. We learn from each other; we have a small garden. From the women of the *Siempre Viva* collective, we have learned how to use medicinal plants. (Author note: There was both formal and informal inter-group cooperation between the four cooperatives. Most were focused on sharing resources or sharing knowledge, as well as support at markets while selling their products).

Individual interview participant

We have different charges, but sometimes there are problems with some of the ladies. Some live far away. We could say we live in different areas. For example, *Anna* lives in the north part and some in the south. I live in the center. Some ladies live even further away. That is a problem because if you give a responsibility to a woman who lives far away, she might not make it on time. The person who mostly assists our meeting is *Sara*. We sell our products every week. Now there you must make it, however possible. You have to be there on time. We already have all the days organized. We have a list. On days that we sell at the *tianguis*, whomever's turn it was to sell that day, that person must stay for a meeting until the end. Until now we have worked well together. (Author note: Here the issues of

difference to include social class are evident. This participant is talking about the difference in time management as well as capacity for travel of the women who live in the most rural areas.)

Collective Abejas de Acteal
Individual interview participant

When we started, I chose myself to coordinate the women, but because I had so many other things to do, other women joined to help coordinate the women. I left for two years and joined again; now I am president. We have an agreement with the women; we all serve our duty for two years. We have strength because of this. Sometimes the women that do not work outside the house and are not encouraged to do this work, they are not allowed to go out, they do not speak because they are embarrassed, they cannot answer anything. Because of this work they have to go to meetings; we always choose three representatives from every community to go to meetings. We have meetings once a month; we switch meeting places every month. That is why we need three representatives aside from the members of the board of directors. (Author note: The participant here is speaking in general about how the cooperatives have and can be used to provide new opportunities for women in the community.)

Collective Siempre Viva
Group interview participant

We are a group called *Siempre Viva*. We work with natural medicines. We enjoy this because we are cured through nature, through the land. Until now the 11 of us have worked well; we are well organized in the preparation of our products. Right now what we want is to keep on getting better; instead of going down we want to go up. For example, when we started we didn't know what to do to get people's attention toward our products. Now a lot of people know who we are and they ask for our products. For us that is a very big accomplishment: people know us and we sell more of our products.

Discussion and Next Steps

Implications for Policy and Practice

While the major finding of this study is that although the women came to cooperative work out of tragedy, displacement, and forced migration, there was something else sustaining them on individual and group levels

beyond monetary gains. Despite their educational and regional differences, they found enough common ground to work and create new roles and new spaces for women in their communities. These findings call into question how advocates and policy analysts view the importance and relevance of cooperative work for women. Should we focus more on women-led cooperatives as a *primary* tool for social change through increased engagement and expanded roles for women, instead of solely an alternative method of making a living, particularly as cooperatives for women in the global south rarely meet the standards of “success” in this area? These findings also remind us of the importance of the nature of empowerment as a process that starts at the individual level. As we have learned from the Zapatistas and civil rights movements in the United States, change comes from the bottom up. One-on-one conversations about shared realities and injustices provide the building blocks for relationships and partnerships that can lead to consciousness raising and social change (Pigg, 2009).

The cooperative development and work reported here was started in response to displacement and internal migration and generates a number of additional avenues for research. Could the cooperatives now be acting as a buffer to the push factors of continued migration? Is the cooperative work presented here providing a tipping point of new opportunities or the potential for new role opportunities for women that create an alternative to further migration? These are important issues to explore for social workers and others interested in investigating globalization.

Despite their extreme poverty and marginalization during periods of unrest, the women in this study have demonstrated clear evidence of change and growth through collective work. They understand the importance of cooperative efforts to survive and to care for their children in a region where government social welfare is unreliable, inadequate or simply nonexistent. They speak as a collective, not as individuals. They are challenging gender roles by participating in collectivism with structured roles and responsibilities (Peterson, 2014). They are reaching out and networking; forming new and productive partnerships; seeking education; and integrating their indigenous culture into their collective work. They do all this within a nation, region, and community that has for hundreds of years insisted that women are subordinate to men and that indigenous communities are fundamentally inferior to the mainstream population. This could not be a clearer demonstration of empowerment. Has the Zapatista challenge to the status quo fundamentally changed this world view for the surrounding communities? Based on these findings, the answer appears to be yes.

In this study, *Zapatismo* provides an interesting context for the expanding role of women in southern Mexico. Specific Zapatista practices, developed as they were in a specific and unusual set of circumstances, will not necessarily translate to the situations faced by others in the global south. But the fundamental insight of the Zapatista movement—the realization that indigenous people and women have been marginalized the most and therefore must be the primary focus of efforts at liberation—can provide the context for expanding the role and improving the social and political status of women through cooperatives as a deliberate policy initiative in many parts of the world.

Conclusion

While more research is needed, what is happening in southern Mexico is hopeful. The indigenous women in this study are defying political, cultural, and gender oppression by becoming leaders in their communities, organizing other women, networking with other indigenous collectives in the area, participating in political struggle, advocating for women's rights, making collective choices for the good of the community, and incorporating indigenous tradition and culture into their collective work (Eber & Kovic, 2003). They are women who were forced to their current location but have created a new space for their own sustainable growth and development via women-run cooperatives.

Although not a focus of this study, it can be concluded that in terms of a capitalist economic model, these four cooperatives were not successful. The women were struggling economically before they joined the cooperatives, and they were struggling after. Even so, the women defined themselves as successful on their own terms. The majority of women were very happy about their experiences in the cooperatives. The relationships formed and the personal growth experienced on a social-political dimension appear to be more important to them than the fact that they are not making much money; this could significantly mitigate the influences of larger push factors to migrate further out. While a focus for future research, potential findings of this research could prove influential in development efforts for both governments and NGOs to fund small-scale projects with less regard to monetary efficacy. This might be a lower threshold in many ways, yet it is possibly a more sustainable, supportable, and achievable level of economic and social development and therefore empowerment for the women of poor and developing nations. Ultimately, the specific practice of encouraging women in similar conditions to partner more with each other, and less with outside organizations or entities, might prove a more productive and empowering model.

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