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## La oficina de la mujer (OMM): A Conduit for Social Empowerment among Women in a Small Guatemalan Lake Community

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LA OFICINA DE LA MUJER (OMM): A CONDUIT FOR SOCIAL  
EMPOWERMENT AMONG WOMEN IN A SMALL  
GUATEMALAN LAKE COMMUNITY

by

Rachel Volk

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College  
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Western Michigan University, 2013

La Oficina de Municipal de la Mujer, the Municipal Office of Women, is a recent creation of the Guatemalan central government meant to help address the inequalities that women experience each day. Like so many towns in Guatemala, La Laguna (pseudonym) contains high levels of poverty and unemployment. Here, women encounter difficulties finding employment, whether as a result of the poor economy or the bigotry arising from structural sexism and racism. My investigation of the OMM uses qualitative anthropological techniques to understand the purpose and effects that this organization has towards women's marginalized position in the town. The application of these techniques reveals that the OMM provides a foundation for individual and small group empowerment, but does not address the structural inequalities that permeate the country's institutions. Still, they forge a foundation for empowerment by transforming women's domestic duties into viable economic niches, providing a space for women beyond the private sphere that allows for the development of social solidarity, and demonstrating that women are knowledgeable to men, by arranging for women to teach men how to make different crafts at the local rehabilitation center.

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Rachel Volk

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	ii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
An Informed Purpose .....	1
Developments in Feminist Research .....	3
What Does it Mean to be a Woman in Guatemala .....	4
Neoliberal Ideals.....	6
Women’s Empowerment .....	8
Racial Divides and Neoliberal Repercussions.....	10
Guatemala-War and Residual Violence .....	13
A New Place for Women.....	14
A Methodological Framework.....	15
Research Limitations .....	19
What Lies Ahead.....	20
II. NARRATIVES.....	22
First Impressions.....	22
Glitter, Gloss, and Glue, Oh My!.....	23
The OMM versus Cultural Subjugation.....	32
An OMM Reflection.....	33

## Table of Contents-continued

CHAPTER	
	OMM: The Purpose in a Conversation .....35
	A Place for Women.....38
	Comedor Style: Ladino Cooking .....42
	Manualidades: Training for the Sewing Trade .....55
	Breaking-down Machismo.....62
	Another Avenue for Social Cohesion .....62
	Rehabilitation: An OMM Opportunity .....64
III. CONCLUSION.....	73
Final Thoughts.....	73
The Strengths of the OMM.....	80
Questions for the Future.....	86
APPENDICES .....	88
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	92

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### An Informed Purpose

Maya women in Guatemala encounter discrimination as a result of patriarchal cultural norms which promote male superiority and dominance, in combination with a legacy of indigenous oppression and subjugation. The recent creation of La Oficina de Municipal de la Mujer (OMM), or The Municipal Office of Women, to help women in communities throughout Guatemala offers an initial step to address and potentially alleviate the sexist and racist ideologies ingrained into the social, legal, and political systems that place women in the home. The OMM's mission statement focuses on providing "information, advice and guidance...[supporting] the organization and training and participation of women in the development council system...[and proposing] the creation of municipal kindergartens" (Manual de Funciones). This contrasts with the OMM's practices, which focus their limited resources on economic training programs rather than on the elements listed above.

The exclusion of women from the public sphere ensures that political, economic, and social power resides in the hands of men, maintaining the structural inequalities that marginalize women. By providing women with economic training opportunities the OMM can set a baseline from which to counteract these inequalities, elevating domestic duties and carving out a place for them in the public sector. Ultimately, the training programs carve out spaces for the expansion of social



solidarity, and women's economic skills, which may improve their self-confidence and present women as knowledgeable to men, forging a foundation for social, economic, and political redress that can empower women.

To investigate this new government organization I apply several ethnographic techniques that include observations, unstructured and structured interviews, and questionnaires. Through the application of these methods, in conjunction with a theoretical background that pulls from some prominent aspects of feminist research as it applies to a neoliberal critique, I discovered that although the OMM has severe financial limitations they still manage to carve out new places for women in society. In this context it is important to understand that place arises from social relations (Montoya and Frazier, ed, 2002) of the past and present which serve as "sites of identity" (Harcourt & Escobar, 2005; 23). The economic skills that the OMM imparts upon these women expand their capabilities which allow them to broaden their place in society to include more than the household. By broadening the scope of what has been traditionally identified as "women's duties" in the home to encapsulate financial security, the OMM undermines the social norms that have prevented women's access to employment and the basic civil liberties that accompany the masculine public domain. In order to understand my conclusions on the utility of the OMM it is necessary to briefly outline the history of feminist anthropology as it informs my interests, as well as to apply a neoliberal critique of the OMM as the organization is the product of a complicated interplay between a violent social history and neoliberal philosophy in a small community on the banks of Lake Atitlan, Guatemala. The

following section concentrates on certain aspects of feminist research as it applies to my research in Guatemala.

### Developments in Feminist Research

Before the first wave of feminism in the 1960s social scientists neglected women in their research (Mohanty, 2003), ignoring half of the human population in favor of androcentrism. The rise of feminism during the civil rights movements of the 1960s initiated a transition in scholarly research, focusing on women and understanding their place in cultures around the world. Women have become the foci for many studies within anthropology, especially as the central actors in maintaining the family and household. The place of women as mothers, the pillar of the family, provides a foundation for the analysis of women's marginalization and agency (Kaplan), which constantly interact with each other, and at times contradict each other, as women maneuver through these cultural norms. From day to day women maintain the home, or domestic sphere (Montoya and Frazier, ed, 2002), a space designated by society as feminine, the domain of women. However, this domain of women ends at the door of a structure that one can label a home. Beyond this door, women experience secondary citizenship, where many civil liberties and protective measures of a society that decides to honor women in one space (the home) are withheld from them in another (the public). This intangible area where women encounter continuous persecution is called the "public sphere" or simply the "community" (Montoya and Frazier, ed, 2002). The gendered division of place and

the accompanying rights distributed to each group arises from social habits influenced by patriarchal cultural perceptions which confine resources and the distribution of those resources to men (Narayan, ed, 2004).

#### What Does it Mean to be a Woman in Guatemala?

In Guatemala patriarchal traditions arising from religious beliefs raise women to partake in this scenario that seems stuck on repeat across the world, supporting a hierarchical, master and slave relationship between men and women. Specifically, the men are raised to be the dominant partners, as the protector and provider of the family (Berger, 2006) while the women tend to daily domestic activities to maintain the home and ensure the families comfort. The word woman indexes an array of culturally determined connotations, such as compassionate, tender, and weak, which reinforce their marginalized positions that constitute traditional gender norms and fit perfectly with society's goal to seclude them from the world expanding right outside their doors (Montoya and Frazier, ed, 2002). However, within their subservient roles women have power as mothers, whether in terms of the past, present, or future, and the prestige associated with that title (Bouvard, 1994). They are responsible for raising children, for teaching them the proper values of the culture, while also taking care of their husbands at the same time (Berger, 2006). This provides women with agency in the domestic sphere. In Guatemala, as in other countries, dominated by neoliberal free-market philosophies, beyond the household walls women's agency is undermined. Amidst the public sphere women encounter exclusion and/or abuse to

further the economic agenda of large corporations and corrupt governments predominantly governed by men (Montoya and Frazier, ed, 2002; Mohanty, 2003). The emphasis society places on situating women to the domestic (private) sphere, reinforces the male-oriented public sphere. Men, as the economic providers of the family, are the ones who must leave the house on a daily basis to earn a living, incorporating them into the social and political sectors generally closed to women. The free-market system of neoliberalism concentrates jobs in urban areas, requiring that men from rural areas emigrate to the cities to obtain employment (Montoya and Frazier, ed, 2002). This provides them with more access to the social and political realms of life, while delegating women to the private sphere to manage the household in isolation (Montoya and Frazier, ed, 2002).

Of course recent changes must be taken into account, which affect these sexual divisions of labor. Many families in Guatemala, indigenous families in particular, have been left without fathers, husbands, uncles, brothers, or sons as a result of a bloody 36-year civil war. The deaths and disappearances of so many men during this war forced women to acquire jobs in the public sector to support their families and ensure their survival. However, women are forced into the dregs of the formal sector, or in the bottom rungs of the informal sector, to battle an economy in ruins since the 1980s, and the preconceived cultural notions that consider women as inherently inferior to the might of men and in need of domination and isolation (Manz, 2004). The key opportunity available in the formal sector consist of maquilas, textile factories owned by foreigners that produce clothing to be sold in Western

countries at pennies on the dollar, a result of economic globalization. Of the thousands of people employed in maquilas 80% are women, working in brutal conditions that endanger them physically, mentally, and emotionally for pay that fails to meet their most basic needs (Grandin and Levenson, ed, 2011). In the informal sector, as I observed many times in the towns surrounding Lake Atitlan, it was common to see women selling colorful crafts in one of the markets located in the various towns across Guatemala, approaching anyone who appears to be a foreigner to try a sell them a brightly colored souvenir. Although markets offer women a wider variety of potential customers to sell their crafts or food items to, this new form of revenue carries no guarantees for profitability and no protection against abuse from other vendors or customers. The hours are long and the work never ending as more women must become mother and father, care-giver and provider, to strike a balance between their domestic duties and increasingly heavy fiscal responsibilities (Montoya and Frazier, ed, 2002).

### Neoliberal Ideals

Neoliberal capitalism promotes the practice and value of an unrestricted free-market economic model in which specialization, private land ownership, self-regulation, and competition are requisite for a profitable and prospering economy (Gibson-Graham, 2006). However, in reality these concepts establish a divide between the rich and poor as lines are drawn between income levels. A class hierarchy then develops that forces the majority of the population into the lowest

income brackets, maintaining inequality as the majority of individuals become puppets of the neoliberal hegemony, while spouting notions of freedom and free-will (Wacquant, 2009). What is not explained, but what is obvious upon reflection, is that the terms “freedom” and “free-will” (as the key indicator of freedom in this context) are simply the propaganda tools of self-regulation. These notions are fallacies used to demean state involvement in the economy and other sectors of society, where freedom means people are “free” to participate in the economy, as an employer or employee, to cater to the demands of consumers (Bourdieu, 1998), unless you are an incompetent, unproductive member of society as assumed in discriminatory practices connected to bigotry. One of the central notions prominent in neoliberal philosophy that both causes and nurtures the class inequalities of neoliberal capitalism is the notion of individualism. This idea places responsibility for participation, success, or failure in the economy on each individual, given that this type of system is viewed as the natural and best economic option (Mohanty, 2003). Neoliberal notions of individualism use the correlation between self-regulation, a privilege that comes with democracy and freedom, and free-trade (Bourdieu, 1998) to create “neocitizens” according to Susan Berger (2006; 4). Neocitizens are ambitious self-sufficient individuals who don’t require assistance from the state, and thus anyone who fails to achieve prosperity is at fault, and no longer considered a proper citizen (Berger, 2006). The expectation for citizens ultimately lead to what Michel Foucault calls a subconscious self-governing mentality in people that maintains social norms (Senellart, 2010) or in the words of Slavoj Zizek “common sense” (2008). The

promotion of independent initiative and ingenuity justifies the historical and contemporary mistreatment of minority groups, such as indigenous groups and women, as their conditions are blamed on their lack of individual initiative, assuming that such independent initiative can elevate them above their current circumstances and overcome the consequences of corrupt governments and systemic inequality.

### Women's Empowerment

Empowering women is imperative for the prosperity of others. In the words of Kofi Annan, the ex-UN Secretary General, "...there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women." (Kristof and WuDunn, 2009; 185). Interestingly, notions of individual initiative are also promoted in discussions surrounding women's empowerment, but only as step-one in a multi-step process. According to the World Bank, a neoliberal organization, "empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives" (2002; 11). Although this definition addresses some of the features which are important to empowerment, it ignores other important factors for the realization of empowerment (female or otherwise), collective interaction and "organizational capacity" (Narayan, 2004; 43). Collective interaction may cause or emerge from organizational capacity, people's participation in organizations, formal or informal, that allow the exchange of ideas and information within a burgeoning camaraderie (Narayan, 2004).

Thus, a more apt definition of empowerment may be borrowed from the work of Zahira Kamal, who defines empowerment as "...a process through which individuals can gain understanding of the constraints that affect their lives, the position of their inner capacities, and forms of solidarity with others to overcome...obstacles" (2011). Abiding by this definition, individual initiative enables women to take the first step towards female empowerment by making the choice to better their circumstances. The concept of individual initiative is itself a neoliberal notion, relying on individuals to enhance their own circumstances, and assuming that the structural discrimination, such as the sexism and racism that indigenous women experience, does not exist or should have no demonstrable impact on their accomplishments. In the OMM this translates through women's participation in the economic training courses. With the decision to improve their lives and the agency to act upon this decision comes social solidarity as women join groups of like-minded individuals. The social solidarity that develops between the women in the economic training sessions arranged by the OMM both preserves and contradicts the self-sustaining, independent ideology promoted by neoliberalism, an unforeseen and fortuitous side effect of these feminized spaces outside the home.

Empowerment is a term frequently applied in development research, which relies heavily on neoliberal ideology as the key to economic prosperity. As such "empowerment" tends to focus on ensuring the individual's ability to maneuver through the minefields created by structural inequalities that discriminate against so many groups of people. This means that while programs, such as the OMM's



economic training programs, based as they are on the individual, may improve the self-confidence and arena for interaction of women by providing these skills, they fail to empower women as a group, leaving the systemic inequalities responsible for the marginalized position of women undisturbed. Still, as I mentioned previously, the OMM should not be condemned or ignored as they maximize their minimal resources in their attempt to help women, carving out additional spaces for women as they adjust domestic tasks into viable economic skills.

### Racial Divides and Neoliberal Repercussions

In countries such as Guatemala, the neoliberal paradigm is at the heart of the economic system perpetuated by globalization as developing countries attempt to compete with the economies of Western powerhouses, such as the United States. The coalescence between neoliberal ideals and economic growth led to the adoption of neoliberal philosophies in countries across the world, including Guatemala. These two properties are seen by many as mutually exclusive, assuming that the only way to ensure the economic well-being of a country is to compete with other countries in the free-market. Unfortunately, participation in this system is far from free in Guatemala as it reinforces the severe social, economic, and political marginalization of more than half the country's population (CIA Factbook, 2012). Among the indigenous Maya a disproportionately high 73% live in poverty, a substantial increase in comparison to the national average, and yet they occupy only 40% of Guatemala's population (CIA Factbook, 2012). The higher prevalence of poverty among the 22 different indigenous

Mayan groups in Guatemala arises from the interaction between preexisting racial prejudices and neoliberalism in the social relationships between the Maya and Ladinos. The Maya have experienced centuries of hardship as a result of the Spanish conquest of Central America. Initial contact with Spaniards led to the loss of their land and forced labor by using a perpetual cycle of debt to ensure the subjugation of the indigenous peoples for the profit of Spaniards, and later their descendants (Reeves, 2006). The Colonial Period of Guatemala's history established racial biases that transcend the last 400 years. The loss of land among the Maya has been particularly detrimental to their livelihoods as Mayan identities are tied to the land (Manz, 2004). Today large export-oriented businesses (fincas) control 65% of the land suitable for agriculture, which is controlled by only 3 percent of land holders (Manz, 2004). Of the remaining land plots, 90% aren't large enough to support peasant subsistence (Manz, 2004) However, this doesn't stop families from trying to plot land, even if the only land available is miles from home on a hill that looks like a cliff with a 50 degree incline above the pot-hole ridden road that winds through the mountains, as I saw many times.

Racial stereotypes that classify Mayans as "slow, lazy, [and] ignorant" were prevalent throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, reinforced by the Vagrancy Laws of 1934 that established a judicial justification for forced Indian labor (Manz, 2004; 41). Specifically, this law claimed Indian labor as an alternative form of taxation; a "voluntary" form of taxation enforced by soldiers carrying rifles and bayonets (Manz, 2004). Neoliberalism feeds the historical discrimination against Mayans in

Guatemala, applying neoliberal philosophies that presume freedom and free-will as inherent to deserving members of the populace. This allows those at the top of the social, economic, and political hierarchy to blame Mayans for their horrendous circumstances, working off their pre-existing concepts of superiority over the “worthless” indigenous population.

There are several cultural markers used to differentiate Ladinos and the Maya. Ladinos identify with Western culture, wearing Western clothing and only speaking Spanish, whereas the Maya identify with their indigenous Pre-Conquest roots. To demonstrate their indigenous identity they wear intricate, brightly colored traditional clothing (the huipil, or top, and corte, a long wrap around skirt, for women) that represents their town affiliations (the significance of which is connected to a clan-like mentality) and speak one of the 22 indigenous languages used throughout the country (Bogin and Loucky, 1997; Pebley and Goldman, 1995). These are the most apparent markers of identity that distinguish Maya individuals versus Ladino individuals. In La Laguna, indigenous and ladino clothing was always distinct, and thus a more useful indicator of each woman’s ethnicity, since most of the women I met and observed spoke Spanish outside the home, rather than the local indigenous language. In comparison, it was more difficult to determine the ethnicity of men in La Laguna since many spoke Spanish in public and wore Western clothing as well, but when asked about their ethnicity would still identify themselves as Kakchiquel Maya.

## Guatemala-War and Residual Violence

The already marginalized position of women and indigenous peoples was exacerbated during the 36 year Civil War that officially ended in 1996 as the guerilla movement became associated with indigenous groups (Sanford, 2008). A war propagated by the Cold War and the U.S. fear of communism resulted in a 1954 coup over the land reform policies of President Arbenz, which would have ensured more equitable land distributions throughout the country (Manz, 2004). This would have limited private companies' access to land in Guatemala, another factor that prompted the coup, financed by the U.S., and the resulting civil war (Manz, 2004). Consistent support from the U.S. in the form of money, personnel, and military training, engendered the unspeakable atrocities committed against hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children (Manz, 2004).

The military's association between the Maya and the guerillas, the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca or URNG (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union) (Berger, 2006), prompted government campaigns to eliminate indigenous people's across the country. As a result, a disproportionate number of people victimized during this civil war were indigenous. In fact from 1978-1985 of the 626 demolished villages, 200,000 disappeared or killed, and 1.5 million displaced, approximately 83% were Maya in comparison to the 17% among Ladinos (Berger, 2006; 12). The military directed violence included a focus on women since they were (and still are) responsible for the perseverance of Maya culture, thus the key to the annihilation of indigenous cultures was the desecration of women (Berger, 2006). To

accomplish their aim “the state trained killers to rape, to mutilate, and to murder women during the war”, killers who still wander freely in Guatemala today (Sanford, 2008; 119).

More than a decade after the civil war, violence against women continues to increase (Sanford, 2008). From 2001-2006 the “female homicide rate increased by more than 117%” (Sanford, 2008; 108). According to Sanford, this trend in combination with police incompetence and negligence in homicide investigations culminates as acts of femicide (2008). Femicide incorporates gender violence, brutality committed against women simply because they are women, as supported by the state through impunity, silence or indifference (Sanford, 2008). Neoliberal individualism and misogynist attitudes within the state and judicial system ensure the subjugation of women in Guatemala causing “impoverishment, deteriorating health, a rise in domestic violence, and a decrease in educational opportunities” among women (Berger, 2006; 5).

#### A New Place for Women

Still, there does seem to be an attempt in Guatemala to counteract the marginalized position of women, both indigenous and Ladina, and the violence that occurs with that label. As of 2010 the Guatemalan central government established Offices of Women, or Las Oficinas de Municipales de las Mujeres (OMM), in each municipal across the country. However, considering the long history of discrimination against women, and indigenous groups, it is necessary to examine the efforts of these

offices to help women in a town where 85-90% of the population are indigenous (History of San Lucas). To determine whether the OMM is effective, and if so to what degree, supplemental questions must be applied in combination with the neoliberal critique discussed above, does the OMM offer tangible social, economic, and/or political improvements to the lives of women? Does the OMM promote the development of economic security among the women in this community? Specifically, does the OMM set a foundation that undermines the subservient status of women by providing them with opportunities to enhance their economic circumstances? If so, how does the OMM accomplish this change? Each of these questions represents problems that are common to women, especially indigenous women, living in Guatemala.

The data I acquired for this investigation was gathered over a time span of 7 weeks, from May-July 2012, as part of the NCSU Ethnographic Field School, during which I examined the role of the OMM to determine whether or not this office plays an important role in the lives of women in a small Guatemalan community that lies on the shores of Lake Atitlan. By using integral anthropological inquiry techniques I conducted a case study to investigate this new government organization.

### A Methodological Framework

My research consists of a mixture of qualitative data-collecting techniques, including observations, interviews, and questionnaires. The observations offered valuable information on the availability of the OMM and how they work during the

day to achieve their objectives. Interviews with key informants revealed the debilitating financial limitations of the office, and additional insights into the OMM's role in the community. Insights into the opinions and understanding of both community members and those directly involved with the OMM were obtained through the distribution of questionnaires that directly addressed questions of the OMM's existence and purpose.

Specifically, the observations conducted during this program focused on the interactions of employees in the OMM, employee interactions with community members, and the interactions between the women, and the men involved in groups connected to the OMM. In my observations of the OMM I used a combination of participant observation and direct systemic observation in order to understand what the employees do in the office during the day, and to determine if women from the community visit the office during the day seeking guidance or assistance. The length of each observation was a minimum of ninety minutes to 2 hours duration.

The second method I use in my research are interviews. This research domain includes the more informal conversations that I have with my informants from the office and the community, as well as the three structured interviews I conducted with 3 key informants. From within the OMM I conducted a structured interview with my key informant, Padma, where she works the afternoons Monday-Friday in the OMM. For comparison, I also conducted a structured interview with a past employee of the OMM, Victoria, asking many of the same questions I applied to my interview with Padma. My last structured interview was with the director of the local

rehabilitation center, Jose, who recently worked with the OMM to train men recovering from alcohol and/or drug abuse to make different crafts. The purpose of interviewing Jose was to figure out why his organization was working with the OMM rather than another organization, and what he thought of the office and their role with the rehabilitation center and the community.

The third ethnographic tool of evaluation that I use within my research are questionnaires. To address two different types of relationships with the OMM between three separate demographics I created three questionnaires, one for each demographic category: female participants from an OMM training program (the cooking class), men benefiting from training arranged by the OMM, and the community of La Laguna. The first consists of eleven questions directed towards seven of the women who participated in the cooking class I witnessed [See Appendix 1]. The questions ask the women about the utility of the cooking class they attended, their knowledge and opinions of the OMM, and a few personal questions that all of the surveys share concerning their age and ethnicity to determine if these factors affected people's opinions. Unfortunately, I was not able to administer these questions to the women myself. Instead, the head of the class, Marcela, gave them to the women at the next class, which I was not able to attend due to time constraints. A week later Marcela returned all seven of the completed questionnaires back to me.

The second set of questionnaires I created was for three of the men from the rehabilitation center. This survey contains 8 questions, asking the men for their opinions concerning the lessons the OMM helped arrange for them, as well as their



personal opinions about the OMM and its role in the community [See Appendix 2]. The first two sets of questionnaires are meant to reflect the opinions of groups who are directly connected with the OMM. In contrast, my last 23 questionnaires, which contain 11 questions, are meant to reflect the opinions of members of the community at large, concentrating on the standing of women in the town and the participant's feelings towards the existence and utility of the OMM for women [See Appendix 3]. These consist of 15 female respondents' ages 19-60 and 8 male respondents' ages 20-58. In this sample of 23 people I approached tienda (store) owners, employees at the local ice cream parlors, phone stores, and a couple of municipal workers from other offices down the hall from the OMM, as part of my convenience sampling. Since I questioned those who I had easiest access to, as an anthropologist or a consumer, some of my questions may have been irrelevant for some of my participants, such as the 2 male workers from other offices in the municipal building who filled out community surveys. Nonetheless, this method proved fruitful for determining the importance of the OMM in the community.

The information obtained through my observations of office operations and economic training classes provide a basis for evaluating the extent to which the OMM assists women in the community. With this information at hand I am able to gain a better understanding of how the women who partake in OMM events benefit, and whether or not the OMM achieves the purpose for which they were created.

Interviews provide a more structured look at how key informants view the office and its capacity to assist women in the town. Finally, the questionnaires establish a solid

foundation from which to consider the opinions of local community members, both female and male, as another method of evaluation to determine the OMM's viability as a conduit for social empowerment by and for Guatemalan women.

### Research Limitations

Although I applied a variety of methods to investigate the OMM, as discussed above, I still encountered certain constraints which hinder my ability to provide an analysis of the OMM without inference and speculation. The greatest limitations of my research, and I believe that many anthropologists share my predicaments where these factors are concerned, are language proficiency and time. Before I arrived in Guatemala I could barely converse in Spanish. Speaking to me was probably akin to trying to converse with a small child due my unfortunate lack of a vocabulary.

Although my Spanish improved during my 2 months there I was still nowhere near an adult speaking level by the time I left, but I was able to converse more consistently and coherently than ever before. Of course, this means that I was frequently unable to ask questions that I thought of spur of the moment to fill informational voids. For instance, questions addressing the creation of the OMM are left to inference and imagination, which could have been answered with more time and interviews between Padma and Gabriella, the OMM director, and myself, concerning how the OMM started.

## What Lies Ahead

This thesis examines La Oficina de Municipal de la Mujer (OMM), the Municipal Office of Women, in La Laguna, a small town on the banks of Lake Atitlan, Guatemala. The name of the town and the names of participants have been altered to protect the identity of my informants. This is a cautionary measure to account for any potential harm that might arise from studying a new government organization in a country with a tumultuous past. Chapter 2 uses multiple narratives revolving around different anthropological methods applied during my 7 weeks in La Laguna. These narratives begin with my first day in the OMM as they prepare and organize a town party for all of the teachers, using social solidarity in the office to produce solidarity in the town by means of this party.

The second narrative combines interviews with a current employee and a past employee of the OMM, offering the reader the chance to see how those most directly associated with the OMM, the employees, interpret the purpose and duties of the organization, as well as reveal some of the inherent challenges they face. The third and fourth narratives follow the cooking and sewing economic training courses arranged by the OMM for local women. These classes establish social cohesion between these women by providing a relaxed atmosphere where women unite to share the enjoyment of learning and the interactions their new education produces.

Next, a narrative that focuses on an interview with the director of the local rehabilitation center provides invaluable insight into how the OMM is proving the worth of women in contradiction to misogynistic cultural notions. My observations of

the OMM's involvement in the rehabilitation center reinforce this analysis as the last narrative, as the new skills taught by the female volunteers allow the men to barter for necessary resources, such as food. This challenges assumptions that demean and belittle women's work as useless, enhancing the importance of the women's skills in a new place, or arena, much like the women themselves.

Chapter 3 reflects on how the OMM offers a new place for women in the town, ensuring a safe and relaxed atmosphere which provides women with new economic and social possibilities. These possibilities break down the divide between the domestic and public spheres of society, allowing women to more easily transverse both of these domains, crafting a foundation for the replacement of misogyny and insecurity with equality and empowerment.

## CHAPTER II

### NARRATIVES

#### First Impressions

Social solidarity is pivotal to the everyday functions of the OMM. The following meet-and-greet narrative illustrates how the work of the OMM revolves around this concept of social inclusion and interaction which begins in the office itself. Their activities are fun and the cost is reasonable as they use basic supplies: paper, glue, and glitter, to display phrases honoring the profession and act of teaching.

It is important to note that the OMM manages difficulties that include deficient funding, which hinders the OMM's ability to establish programs to improve the lives of women in the area and prevents them from meeting the goals outlined in the organization's manual. This lack of funding also hampers the OMM from providing the advice and guidance that would support the development of council systems in the area, and kindergartens to better enable women in the town to fully participate in the work force (Manual de Funciones). Regardless, the OMM pushes forward as an active member of the community, celebrating education and the dedication of local teachers, men and women, creating the decorations and food that will make this gathering a community wide fiesta. Events such as this establish and maintain social solidarity between the individuals who live here, bringing them together for relaxed social interaction outside of work, allowing everyone to interact

in a safe and comfortable environment from the beginning stages of preparation to the celebration itself.

At the point that this narrative describes, I had been in La Laguna for 3 weeks getting to know my host family and the small community. The narrative gives my perspective on my initial contact with the OMM and how my research there unfolded.

Glitter, Gloss and Glue, Oh My!

I take daily walks around the town with a friend who also participates in the summer field school, talking with the locals who frequent the park in front of the municipal building, tienda owners, and the employees at the panaderias (bakeries). The first time I hear about the OMM is after one of the program directors suggests that I ask my host mother whether or not such an office exists in my town, since I am interested in women's roles across cultures. After speaking with my host mother I discover that there is a La Oficina de la Mujer in the town, which Maria, my host family's domestic servant, leads me to. I enter the office to speak with Laila, the only person present, introducing myself as an American student studying anthropology. This explanation takes several minutes until she finally nods her understanding, to which I ask for permission to study the OMM several times a week for my project. She takes notes as I speak, and nods her acquiesce, although her furrowed brow, indicating her confusion, gives me pause. To try and alleviate any confusion I offer to obtain a letter of intent from the director of my program. She smiles at this option, nodding her head vigorously. Assuming that her acceptance provides me with an

opening I ask, “Are there particular days that work best for me to come in for observations?”

“Yes, Mondays and Wednesdays in the afternoon are best.”

“Excellent. Can I bring you the letter from my director Tuesday morning?”

After a moment of hesitation she responds, “Yes, that’s fine”.

Smiling with relief I say, “Thank you so much, I’ll return with the letter on Tuesday. Thanks you for your help.” I take my leave of the office after Laila’s goodbye, elated and nervous, anticipating a change in these seemingly intangible plans. On my way back to my host family I wonder about Laila’s hesitation, hoping that I didn’t misinterpret the conversation at any point, and that she actually agreed to my presence and research of the OMM. Once I walk through the metal gate guarding my host family’s property, and into the house I put aside my worries to assure my host mother that everything went fine. Smiling happily for my success my host mom asks if I would like some tea to which I happily agree. Tea in hand, I sit down on the couch with her to watch her favorite television shows, telenovelas, and loose myself in the ridiculous drama unfolding before me, calming my nerves.

On Wednesday morning I wake up, as usual, at 7 am. The paper thin walls and window in my room that reveals the kitchen does little to prevent the sound of my host family rummaging through drawers for clothes in their room and preparing breakfast, that always includes eggs and black beans for my host father. As I rise and gather my basic toiletries; toothbrush, toothpaste, face wash, and a water bottle to rinse my toothbrush, my mind is bombarded by angst at the knowledge that today is

the day I will begin my ethnographic research with La Oficina de la Mujer. The thought that plagues my mind as I brush my teeth making sure to use aqua pura, pure water, from my water bottle rather than the contaminated tap water that includes parasites particularly nasty for foreign stomachs, is that I have no idea what to expect; who will be there or what they will be doing during the day. My first experience abroad, and like so many people before me, I am plagued by the unknown. Of course, my grade-A personality only amplifies my nerves, making my heart dance to an erratic rumba in my chest. I wash my face amidst the chirping of the family parakeets in the yard beyond the window transferring my angst, not for the first or final time, toward my spotty Spanish. With only a few years of remedial Spanish to help me I imagine being incapable of communicating with the women at the OMM, or saying something taboo by accident. Moving back to my room I choose a modest, culturally appropriate outfit; full-length black skirt with a spring flower design lining the bottom and a matching black blouse figuring that even if I commit a verbal faux pas, at least I won't offend anyone with my wardrobe. The smell of fried eggs turns my stomach as I make my way to the kitchen for breakfast. After a brief conversation with my host mother, a short and stout woman in her 50s, whose tanned leathery skin makes her appear to be a decade older, I head out of the house, bright yellow purse in tow. The three minute walk to my destination takes me through the local market, the town's one stop-shopping center, where women, men and children set up their various stations containing everything from food to clothing and other trinkets. Scents of raw poultry and fresh fruit mingle in the air, not helping the somersaults rapidly turning in



my stomach. Simultaneously, the sounds of rhythmic clapping coming from the tortilla stands reverberate throughout the market as groups of indigenous women circle cement ovens where the silver dollar flour tortillas, that accompany every meal among the indigenous and ladino peoples, bake.

Leaving the scents and sounds of the market behind me I step out of the sun and under the overhang of the municipal building to hear the reassuring sounds of laughter. Before I enter the office I take my notebook and pen from my purse and with trepidation step into La Oficina de la Mujer for my first observation as an anthropologist. Immediately upon my entry into the OMM the laughter subsides as those present, 5 women and 1 lone man, become attuned to my presence in the office. While battling my apprehension at having the undivided attention of everyone in the room I notice that the women all seem to be working on some kind of crafts, cutting out letters on colored paper encompassing different hues of blue, red, purple, green, and yellow. Though the room is full of smiles, some of them welcoming, some clearly enjoying my uncertainty, the silence moves me to speak to the only person I recognize, one of the employees I had briefly talked to the day before when I gained permission to begin my observations in the office. “Good morning, do you remember talking to me yesterday about coming to the office today for my project? I brought in a letter from my director.” Apparently, my mangled Spanish is good enough to convey my point as she nods her head in recognition while an older woman in her 50s approaches me with a polite smile and commanding presence. In this room of 6 people she is the only one to step forward to speak with me, demonstrating her

elevated position in the office. “My name is Rachel (or Raquel as it is pronounced in Spanish). I’m a student from the U.S. here to study cultural anthropology, and I would like to study the office for my program project. Did you receive the letter from my director?” In response to my nervous rambling this slight woman smiles, nods and shakes the hand that I awkwardly hold towards her, “My name is Padma. It’s nice to meet you”. She moves to retrieve the letter, which has been stamped with an official looking seal, one assumes of the municipality, then begins to ask questions to elaborate the circumstances of the present situation. Of course, my utter confusion obstructs her attempt to glean more information. After a couple minutes of talking she finally says something that I understand, “Are you going to help us today?” Surprised, I take a moment before I answer, “Yes, I would like to help”, while my mind alters between excitement at the thought of my first act of participant observation, and the utter terror at being thrust into a situation I was not at all prepared for. After all, if I’m busy helping with these signs how can I accurately observe my surroundings? Will this ruin or enhance my research? How much will I miss by participating rather than simply observing?

I follow Padma over to a long table, “We are making signs for the teacher’s party next Friday”, and gestures towards the strip of paper about 7 feet long lying across the table. “There are a lot of signs that need to be made. Then, after those are done, we will make all of the food for the party as well, so we only have today and tomorrow to make the signs to ensure we have enough time to prepare the food.” While many people might be overwhelmed at such a prospect Padma seems mildly

entertained with the time crunch she faces, the corners of her mouth turned up throughout her entire explanation of what's to come over the next few days. The only response I have time to provide is a widening of my eyes and a smile to indicate my empathy and amusement for the situation before the man who has been listening to Padma and I amid the chatter of the women introduces himself. "Hello, my name is Fernando. It's nice to meet you", a pleasant toothy smile accompanies his handshake.

"Rachel. It's nice to meet you too." With the typical formalities out of the way Fernando leans forward to kiss my right, then left cheek, as is customary in Guatemalan greetings, especially among Ladinos, but something I had not experienced until that moment, throwing me a little off kilter since I had become accustomed to people skipping this particular custom when interacting with me. Obviously interested in my presence there Fernando begins to question me about my trip to Guatemala. "What brought you to Guatemala?" My answers are limited as the smell of Elmer's glue, the high pitched chatter of the women talking behind him, and a general mind numbing exhaustion combine to render me incapable of comprehending basic words much less sentences. Still, I manage a response, "I'm participating in a university anthropology program from the U.S. to learn about Guatemalan culture." What I really wanted to say was something more like, I'm here to learn about the methods of anthropology while also learning about different aspects of Guatemalan culture, but under the circumstances I was happy to get as close as I did.

Padma sets up a table for me, arranging the glue at a corner above the paper banner, and next to the colorful paper letters that will soon form inspirational phrases exalting local teachers. Fernando smiles, “That’s interesting, how long are you here?”

“For another month, and then I’ll go back to Michigan”. He raises his eyebrows at the word “Michigan”, obviously this is not a state he’s heard of before. He confirms my suspicions when he asks, “Where is Michigan?”

Padma moves to one of the desks, searching for a piece of paper as she rummages around the women and the colored letters strewn about the desks as I reply, “In the north and middle of the U.S. About 3,000-4,000 miles from here.” His eyes widen in surprise at the distance I’ve travelled to stand in the OMM at that moment. Before Fernando has the chance to continue his polite inquisition Padma returns to the table having successfully found the paper she was looking for. Fernando smiles and returns to his desk to work on the computer he occupied several minutes earlier, allowing Padma to explain the paper she holds up for my viewing pleasure. “These are all of the phrases we have to make signs for. So if you want to start with the first one, all of the letters are in this pile”. Then, rather than explain what I need to do Padma puts the list down on the table to demonstrate. One would think that something I did throughout elementary school would be common knowledge as an adult, but with the first step she surprised me, laying out the letters to make sure there was enough space on the paper before gluing the first one, pausing once-in-awhile to ensure that I was following what she was doing and could replicate it for each of the signs I would make that day. My crafty side revived with her demonstration, I

immediately take over once she steps back from the table, gluing the letters in their appropriate places.

Over the next 2 hours, time passes quickly as everyone in the room works together to finish as many signs as possible. The sound of snipping scissors ceases after about 30 minutes allowing everyone to transition from cutting to gluing and pasting. Fernando is the only one who does not participate in the cutting or gluing portion of party preparations. In fact, he never leaves the computer while each of the women works continuously on the signs before them, progressing down the list from one phrase to the next. Fernando's stationary position before the computer makes me wonder what exactly he's doing, and if it's related to the party, other municipal business, or more reminiscent of American down time; Facebook surfing.

Unfortunately, the reality will forever remain a mystery to me as I was never able to step away from my station to find out. The amount of glitter strewn about the room increases exponentially with each completed sign as the women use 2 or three different colors to compliment the signs that lay wet with glue; arrays of purple, silver, gold, green, red and blue reflect the natural light filtering through the open doorway and the artificial light from the light fixtures above. Padma's leadership role in the group is reaffirmed throughout the glitter process as the women ask for her approval of the colors they plan to use for each sign. A young man joins the milieu after about 45 minutes greeting everyone in the room and shaking my hand before joining an older woman (likely his mother), sitting at a desk to work on the signs as well. For the last 90 minutes I work with a partner, quickly establishing an easy flow

as we each find our niche in the glitter and glue tornado producing 7 different signs. At the end of two hours my hands are covered in dried glue and a rainbow of glitter, rough against my skin, and I begin to feel more at ease in the OMM, among all of the people who have graciously allowed me into their lives. The women who at first viewed me with slight discomfort and curiosity say goodbye with friendly smiles and thanks.

My first day interacting at the OMM demonstrates how the office functions to bring people together, to form bonds of solidarity through communication and recognition that begins in the preparation process as women and men join together under a common flag, as the saying goes. When both men and women are honored and celebrated for teaching the youth of the community this provides a crucial step from which women are recognized as individuals with valuable knowledge and skills that are not purely secluded to the home, which promotes an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance that might begin to break down cultural barriers that have marginalized women in the past.

The participants in the OMM's town fiesta convey a welcoming atmosphere to both the locals and outsiders by easily working together, though they seemed to be from different offices of the municipality, and accepting me as an assistant in their endeavor. The simple tasks before them promote focus and conversation simultaneously, prompting the development of social cohesion between those present. In this space they exude acceptance and inclusion as everyone works in sync with a common goal, women and men, indigenous and ladino, a firsthand glimpse of what

the office can bring to the community beyond the four bright pink walls that encapsulate them.

Events such as these are a rare occurrence, but while walking the streets of La Laguna one will frequently see people conversing with each other throughout the day. In fact, the market, a pivotal location of commerce in the area, involves a great deal of sociability between the merchants and consumers who visit the various booths containing a wide assortment of merchandise including clothing, shoes, kitchen utensils and a variety of fresh foods. Although the market offers local residents opportunities for social interaction, with the majority of participants being women, the OMM offers a different type of social interaction, one devoid of the commercial relationship that may result in producer-consumer tensions as the bargaining ritual begins. Thus, the interactions produced through OMM activities remove power dynamics and prompt an easy-going shared framework for social interplay.

### The OMM versus Cultural Subjugation

In an interview, Victoria, a past employee of the OMM and the sister of my host father, provided an insider's prospective of the OMM's initial development and purpose as a participant in the organization before the office had even been officially established by the Guatemalan central government. During the interview Victoria purports the original intent behind the birth of the OMM to be a tool for the development of public spaces for women, which encounters constant conflict. She illuminates the disjunction between the cultural subjugation of women and the

freedom that accompanies feminized places in society, an important consideration in the evaluation to determine the OMM's effectiveness for assisting the women in La Laguna.

### An OMM Reflection

On a sunny afternoon I joined Victoria in her living room, my second home in Guatemala, taking a seat on the couch as I have done so many times before. The moment I sit Victoria smiles at me and says, "Let's begin."

Smiling at the informality of the whole situation I ask, "When was the Office of Women established?"

"Five years ago, when I worked there, it didn't exist. It was legalized four years ago I believe, but I didn't work for them during that time. I mainly made phone calls to other women, trying to make them aware of their rights because women do not have many rights in Guatemala."

Nodding and writing furiously since I forgot my recorder, I continue with my second question, "Why was the office established?"

"Well, because women needed a space, a space that focuses on the condition of women. Before this there wasn't an office that focused on women specifically."

"What is the purpose of the Office of Women?"

"To provide necessities, to promote the rights of women, to produce projects that address questions and concerns in the community..." Her responses share an empathetic sentiment for the plight of women in Guatemala, while keeping



everything vague at the same time. “The OMM also helps women get jobs by training them, but there are many people who do not think that women should work, so they refuse to hire women or buy things from them. Or the women are too busy taking care of their children, and since there is no daycare here the women have to take care of their children rather than work.”

Battling the hand cramps forming in my right hand from writing I ask, “What kinds of services does the office offer to the community?”

“Capacitaciones (training) where women learn different trades for women, like cooking and sewing. There are also orientations for women’s rights. This is especially important.” I nod in agreement, but wonder if the OMM actually goes out of their way to hold orientations like Victoria describes, alerting women that they have the right not to suffer from domestic violence, that men do not have the right to abuse them and spend money, meant for food, clothing, and shelter, on alcohol or drugs. Those abuses occur frequently in Guatemala, and although I have heard several people mention them, men and women, I have not heard the OMM address these problems as an organization. When I talked to Padma about what they do, she never mentioned anything about women’s rights orientations, groups, or gathering, three words I am extremely familiar with in Spanish. Perhaps the training opens up women’s minds to begin to think more about their own rights as their confidence in their own abilities increase, overcoming the cultural norms that suffocate women who might attempt to be independent and the family provider.

“What is the budget of the office?”

With a slight roll of her eyes and a laugh Victoria says, “I don’t know, but offices generally have them.”

“Do you think that the office helps women in the community?”

Victoria shakes her head slightly, and with an expression of regret says, “Only a little bit because there is so little information available to women. People are not aware of the problems that exist. They aren’t conscious of them.”

This last question reveals a contradiction that exists in Victoria’s interview. Earlier she mentioned that the OMM was supposed to spread awareness, and yet people are not aware enough to enable genuine change in society, or at least this seemed to be what she was implying. Perhaps she has a point, although that doesn’t stop them from trying, or from providing a space that is specifically designed for women. Although the OMM encounters difficulties they do not stop trying to change the cultural standards that marginalize women, as demonstrated by the fact that even before the legalization of their organization women worked together to spread awareness and an understanding of women’s plight in Guatemala.

#### OMM: The Purpose in a Conversation

The following interviews with Laila and Padma, as current employees of the OMM most accurately depict what the OMM does from the hours of 8-5. Specifically, my unstructured interview with Laila revealed the length of time the OMM dedicates to the economic development of women. The OMM arranges for 2 months of economic training courses to be taught to the women, whether in the form

of cooking or sewing. Similar to Victoria's interview, Padma depicts the OMM as a mechanism for the definition of space in the name of women.

Sitting in the OMM on another sunny morning I found myself waiting for Padma to arrive as Laila sat at her desk clicking away on the keyboard. After wondering briefly if she might be perusing Facebook or something similar, I began to ask her questions to fill the ringing silence that accompanied Padma's absence. "Do many people come to the office during the day?" Looking up from her key board she maintained a benign expression, "No, not usually". Seeming to understand my need to end the silence, Laila rose from her desk to move over to sit opposite me on the couch, waiting for the next question that she knew was coming. "What does the office do to help women?"

"We teach women how to cook, which they can use for employment". Her answer elicits several additional questions, including a question meant to confirm that what I thought I heard and what she actually told me was the same thing. "Then, the office helps women obtain employment?"

"Yes." She adds several more statements to the end of this affirmation, all of which is lost on me. Still, I push on, "What do you teach during these classes?"

"The classes teach women how to cook different foods and cakes." Sitting with her back straight, rather than leaning against the back of the couch Laila waits, amazing me with her stillness.

"Is the food for work or for the women's families?"

“For work, but also for their families”. I wait a moment hoping that she will elaborate. How is the food for both work and their families? Does she mean it in a direct sense, as in their families will have more food to eat, or indirect sense, that they will then be able to work and sell the food for money, which they can use to buy additional food for their families? Unfortunately, I waited the extra few seconds in vain, quickly realizing she was not going to continue, and since I could not come up with the necessary words to convey the questions that occur with each answer Laila provides I stick to the basics. “Where are the classes? In the municipal building?”

“No, the women who participate hold them in their homes”.

“How many classes are there during the week?” I was pretty sure there was only one, but maybe there was more than one group partaking in these classes.

“There is one class a week for 8 weeks”. My first thought was why 8 weeks? From later observations I learned that each class teaches the women how to make a new dish, so if there are 8 classes then the women would learn how to make 8 new dishes that they have never cooked before. Perhaps this was the number of dishes they needed to learn in order to be economically prepared for participation in the food industry, or as a domestic servant.

The previous conversation reveals one of the key components of OMM activities, to offer women valuable economic training, blending the private sphere, a space designated for women, with the public, dismantling cultural boundaries that consistently marginalize women in Guatemala. Although this is a small scale effort when one takes into consideration the horrendous abuses that women throughout La

Laguna, and Guatemala, encounter on a daily basis, it is an effort; a first step that may enable further assistance, and the dramatic changes necessary to end the desecration of women. After all, change, no matter how small or large scale it may be, must begin with a foundation that questions and challenges traditionally oppressive value systems.

### A Place for Women

Several days later I find myself sitting across from Padma in the OMM for the interview we had been planning over the last week. I keep my initial questions basic, focusing on the when, why, and what of the OMM.

“When was the OMM established?”

“The office in San Lucas was legalized in 2010. In 2008 it wasn’t legal, but they were operating in the town. By 2010 all of the towns in Guatemala had an Office of Women.” This statement reinforces the timeline established by Victoria, but does not answer who was operating the OMM before 2010, why it became legal in 2010, or even whether the organization could be defined as illegal prior to 2010. Although some of these questions did cross my mind at the time my lack of Spanish skills prevented me from being able to ask them. Instead, I continued on to my next preexisting question, hoping that I might be able to infer some probable answers from her response.

“Why was the office established?”

“To help with family problems, especially those of inter-family violence. It is also meant to pass on information, and to guide and help women.” By “pass on information” I assume that Padma means spread awareness since the authorities are ill-equipped, in both training and empathy, to help women who suffer from mental and physical abuses. And if this was the focus of OMM operations before 2010, which I assume to be the case since such goals are not mentioned in the OMM manual, then it may have been a small citizenry directed group, lacking the funding necessary to do more than spread awareness. Presumably, if this were an NGO organization then there would have been at least some funding to enable them to make more tangible efforts to help women and address the issues Padma mentions above. Also, it seems plausible that since the central government adopted the OMM and turned it into a municipal office in not only La Laguna, but throughout towns across the country, that perhaps it was a woman’s movement that gained enough attention to garner the interest of the government. Now, whether the purpose behind this interest is benevolent support or direct control remains to be seen. However, it is possible that the OMM could have been initially created by an NGO with limited funding, which then became a government office. Additional interviews need to be conducted in order to provide definitive answers to these concerns. Regardless, I continue my questions in an attempt to discover what the OMM means to someone whom is pivotal to its day to day functions.

“What is the purpose of the OMM?”

“To provide a space for women.” This answer assumes that women are outsiders in their own communities as they would not need their own space if they were accepted as women. Naturally, my next question addressed the ways in which the OMM might plan to accomplish this goal, “What kinds of services does the Office of Women offer to the community?”

“The OMM helps people with problems and provides direction...”, her words continue to flow, but each word is more inconceivable than the next. Once she finishes I ask “How many employees does the office have?”

“For now there are 2. The director and I are the only employees at the Office of Women.” This seems to be the general trend for the OMM, as Laila’s employment with the OMM when I first arrived was a temporary position. It seems that the OMM can only afford to keep 2 women on staff as full-time employees, although both Padma and Gabriella, the OMM director, have another job in addition to their jobs at the OMM so that they can take care of their families. Out of curiosity I had to ask “What is the office budget?”

Pursing her lips just slightly, as if in irritation, Padma responds “There isn’t a budget for the office, but there should be. There are other Offices of Women in other town that have a budget, but we do not.”

“Then, where does your salary come from?”

“The federal government gives a certain amount of money to the town, and that is where I get my very small paycheck.” She uses her thumb and forefinger to demonstrate just how small. “I have to have another job because I do not receive

enough money for my position here. And things change when there is a new president.”

“When the president of the country changes?”

“Yes.”

Although I wanted to ask what changes occurred with the inauguration of the most recent president I stuck with my prepared questions. “What are the budgets for the other offices?”

She shrugged her shoulders, “I don’t know.

“But the other offices do have budgets, right?”

My words spark a spurt of laughter from Padma, “Yes, the other offices have budgets.”

Curious to know what exactly the federal government will spend money on I asked, “What are some of the other offices in the municipal building?”

Her response includes some offices one might expect, such as an office for water management and the mayor’s office, but one that you might not expect is the Office of Cable Television. It is interesting that the federal government will spend money on an office dedicated to the maintenance of western popular culture, but will not spend money to provide a budget for an office trying to improve people’s lives. Still, regardless of the non-existent budget, the OMM still has plans to improve the lives of women in Guatemala.



## Comedor Style: Ladino Cooking

Economic training is a direct benefit that the OMM provides on a recurrent basis to women in the community. The types of economic training alternate between topics such as cooking and manualidades, or tourist-oriented crafts, meant to enable women to be economically independent when there are few to no opportunities to earn money locally. The limited job opportunities stem not only from the economic downturn prominent throughout the country (and the world at large) but also the cultural attitudes that designate the home as the space for women, hindering them from being able to acquire gainful employment as it contradicts those social norms. The cooking class organized by the OMM offers women the opportunity to learn how to cook food appropriate for local Ladino restaurants, thus providing them with a new economic niche that both challenges and plays into the domestic categorization of women. This niche demonstrates the practicality of domestic work outside of the private sphere, which presents an opportunity for the transformation of the public and private spheres into a more holistic category inclusive of both men and women. The following narrative is a prime example of how the OMM functions as a part of a community, spreading social solidarity beyond the confines of their bright pink office walls.

The morning of the cooking class Laila and Padma arrive together in a tuk tuk about 7 minutes late, or at least late according to U.S. standards. More and more people are pouring into the municipal at this time; obviously time is more flexible here. Everyone strolls into work, a stark contrast to the frantic rush that I'm use to

witnessing among those who work the 9-5, or 8-5, circuit back home. After morning greetings Padma informs me, “We will be leaving for the cooking class in a few minutes”, the reason for my early morning presence. A few minutes turn to 15 as Laila and Padma proceed to clean the office and I realize that I’m going to have to adjust to the more lenient and flexible schedules of the municipal workers. Feeling useless I pick up a rag at the end of the long table to help Laila dust and wonder if the cooking class that was supposed to begin at 8:00 am is already underway. If the answer is yes it means that I was wrong about the role of the OMM in this process, perhaps rather than training them personally they simply arrange for the classes, location, and instructor. Later, I would find out that my revised assumption was correct, that the OMM spends the afternoons planning instructional gatherings, such as the cooking class. I am at once disappointed, realizing that I am going to miss some of the cooking class, and happy, to be able to help the women clean the office that has become another home to me in Guatemala.

Once the cleaning is finished Padma introduces me to a young man who waits outside the doors of the OMM, carrying a miniature camcorder. “Rachel, this is Juan. Juan this is Rachel, a student from the U.S.” We shake hands and the three of us (Laila stays behind in the office) walk down the 6 or 7 steps into the park and to the main street beyond it. I walk behind Padma and Juan as they talk, jovially and rapidly, about who knows what. For perhaps the 100<sup>th</sup> time my Spanish fails to translate any piece of the conversation going on in front of me. Despite this both Padma and Juan attempt to include me a couple of times by asking me questions

about cooking. Padma starts with “Do you like to cook?” Of course, this is yet another skill that I lack, abysmally so. To cover my embarrassment at not being able to do something that every woman and girl over the age of 5 can do in Guatemala I laugh before I reply, “No, I can make sandwiches and that’s about it.” With this new understanding of their American friend Padma and Juan laugh with me as I describe a typical meal at home. “I’ll make a sandwich with tomato, avocado, and chicken or sometimes I’ll make eggs. Both are difficult to ruin.”

Leisurely, we turn onto the stone road of a small neighborhood that rests on the outskirts of town. The housing structures consist of a mix of scrap metal, cement, and wood spanning a couple of acres, forming homes for at least 30 different families. We pass a few haggard dogs suffering from malnutrition and several young children playing in the stone and dirt walkway that winds throughout the complex as we make our way to our final destination. The home before us, a cement structure of yellow and brown with a small immaculate yard of bright green grass, surrounded by pink and purple flowers and other plush green vegetation, such as ferns, is one of the nicest homes in the complex.

Padma enters first, “Con permiso” (with permission), and I hear a muffled voice rise from the crowd of women beyond to grant her polite request for entrance. I enter next, a little nervous and thus not asking permission to enter followed by Juan who enters behind me after also receiving verbal permission to move about the premises. I smile at the women carrying out various tasks and duties as I walk further into the house, wondering if they knew that I was coming. Judging from the outright

stares of the 14 women distributed at multiple cooking stations I guess the answer to that question is no. Thankfully, the staring lasts only seconds, and as I continue to smile the women smile back and focus on the tasks before them.

From the pathway that divides the rooms of the house from the covered area, I attempt to blend in with my surroundings and settle in to observe the women and their children, while trying to not feel like a creeper as I remove my notebook and pen, signaling my transition into researcher mode.

With the proverbial flip-of-the-switch from traveler to anthropologist I move to the hallway a couple yards in front of the compound's entrance. The first thing I notice through the joyful screaming of small children and laughter of women is a large stove that seems to be specifically for the cooking class as its placement in the yard seems uncharacteristic of what might constitute a "typical" yard, for those who are fortunate enough to have one. The stove is at least 3 feet in width, and 4 feet in height with two burners made for large pans meant to produce enough food to feed a small army, or meant for the purpose of producing enough food to sell to others.

To the right of the stove is a large sink divided into three smaller units. Here a woman uses water to clean at least 30 large banana-like leaves, though it is not until later that I discover their purpose in today's lesson. Near the end of the class each huge banana-like leaf encompasses a tomalito, a corn-based dough that is the U.S. equivalent of bread that accompanies dishes in Italian restaurants, and placed in a large pan to be steam cooked for about 15 minutes. Meanwhile, women's voices float in, out, and between the swish of water running over the leaves and the laughter of the

6 young children running freely in and out of the complex, as they work at their different stations kneading the corn dough of the tomatitos. Although I cannot begin to understand what is being said, the facial expressions and tones of the women convey comfort and ease throughout their conversations, as they incorporate social interaction with economic training.

Next to the small stove, picking through and peeling something that appears to be a green grain of some kind, several other women chat and laugh. At no point are any of the women remorse or melancholy, angry or bitter, one can only hear laughter, interspersed with cooking instructions spoken above the gathering to keep the course going. The women's discussions seem pleasant as each can be frequently seen smiling or laughing about one comment or another. The women before me manage to do something that is challenging in a more structured setting, combine education and learning with social interplay and relaxation. The only woman who maintains a strict manner of decorum and reserve is the instructor. The instructor, a woman of about 30, doesn't smile as she is providing direction to the women in the class. She goes from one group to another every 5-10 minutes to double check their activities and to add further instruction. Interestingly, she is also 1 of 2 Ladinás in the group, while the rest, according to their dress, are indigenous. As the instructor raises her voice to provide all of the women with new instructions the women immediately disperse and set forth to accomplish these tasks, reminding me of a 'divide and conquer' mentality. The 'ding ding' sound of a wooden spoon hitting the side of a large sauce pan on the small stove clashes with a constant pounding in the background, arising from

construction occurring behind the house. However, the sound is nothing compared to the heavenly smell of sautéed onions floating throughout the room as the women continue their lesson. At the dough table 9 women gather handfuls of the corn-based dough to wrap them in the large leaves washed at the sink earlier, while Padma and Juan take a break from taking pictures, video, and observing the women, to look at their phones.

“Ahhhhhhhh!” The screams of the 3 little girls running up and down the hall ricochet from the floor tiles to the ceiling and into my waiting eardrums as I become temporarily distracted from the activities before me. The women seem to be immune to this change, focusing instead on multitasking, carrying out instructions and chatting with friends simultaneously. Padma moves over to the hallway where I have restricted my presence to since our arrival. She takes one of the short stools that sit along the hallway and motions for me to join her. Upon sitting down Padma explains, without any questions from me, that the dough in the leaves was for making tomalitos, which are very popular for economic purposes. I assume the reason for this is that the ingredients are basic, cheap, and simple to make in large quantities, all of which are necessary for an expenditure such as a restaurant, or comedor as they would call it around Lake Atitlan. With her brief explanation complete Padma looks me in the eyes for several seconds in expectant silence, waiting for me to verbalize the additional questions she knew were to come.

I oblige her expectation asking, “Are there other classes after this one?”

Smiling easily at my first question of the day Padma replied, “Yes, the manualidades (a crafts class), is being taught this afternoon. Although it will be in a different location.”

“What other things does the office do to help women?”

The laughter of the women combined with the whir of the blender a couple of feet away mincing garlic undermines the conversation that began only a minute before. Through the resounding commotion I am able to make out the word “lawyer”. As she continues to answer my question she says “...there is a lot of violence in Guatemala”, gesturing to the women cooking before us. I don’t know why I’m surprised by this. Her gesture indicates that some of the women before me have experienced such violence, though you would never know it from looking at them as they laugh at jokes that only they understand, sharing in an economic endeavor that doubles as a social event. Then she says “On Monday I will be going to a workshop that teaches women how to make bolsas (purses). Would you like to come?”

With a huge smile on my face at being readily invited to another economic training class I reply, “Yes, that would be great.” Though this conversation succeeds in answering a few questions it leaves me with even more questions than when it began.

In all of my observations of the OMM I have never seen a woman enter the office to discuss trouble with violence, though she made it seem like the classes offer a respite from this violence, something that I’m sure some of these women are taking advantage of. Although violence is frowned upon it is still a prevalent problem in

Guatemala. Padma's inclusion of a lawyer in her explanation also intrigues me. I have never heard a lawyer mentioned before, nor have I ever seen anyone enter who might be classified as such. Perhaps it is Padma's hope that they will be able to recruit a lawyer to help in cases of domestic violence. However, this seems borderline whimsical as it is taboo for women to report abuse in Guatemala. The exposure of abuse in the family shames the entire family, and frequently elicits ridicule from family members towards the victim, thus what good is a lawyer if the woman's own family will persecute her for even mentioning her abuse?

After the women finish wrapping the dough in the leaves they take them to the big stove to boil the 30 some leaves in an industrial sized pot. The pot overflows with the tomalitos even with the blue plastic wrapped around the top of the pan to prevent the food and heat from escaping. Juan films the transition of the tomalitos from the table to the pan, continuing his habit of filming each step of the cooking process, as Padma watches and occasionally snaps a photograph.

On the small stove some anonymous seeds are being roasted (only anonymous to me of course). Of the 3 women gathered around this stove, one of them stirs the contents while the others enjoy the downtime created by this particular step. As the other women clean up the tables of the various work stations the 3 women at the small stove chat, as do 4 women watching the large pot of tomalitos several feet away. The next phase begins as the women who were cleaning use a blender to blend garlic, which smells fabulous as Juan stands to the side filming this most recent cooking development. The women never seem to care about whether or not they are



being filmed, they just go on about their business as if nothing matters but the duties before them and the moments of interaction that accompany them.

The 4 women relaxing against the large stove chat as the instructor explains the next steps of the cooking process. Not only are they oblivious to what is going on no more than 5 feet away from them, they are missing some of the key instructions to the meals creation. Just my personal opinion, but garlic is one of the most important and necessary aspects to meals. It seems that these women, all in their 60s, might be there more for the social aspect than anything else. Since these women are indigenous I assume they do not know how to make the dish themselves as this dish is not a part of the traditional diet that many indigenous peoples rely on from day to day.

In contrast to the social immersion of these women, one woman stands at the sink, separated from the group, constantly washing dishes as the others continue to the final steps of the course. The dough station transforms into the meat preparation station as a white colored meat is brought over to the table (might be chicken). Seven women surround the table as the instructor stands center stage. As she begins to explain what I can only assume is the way to prepare the meat, Marcela, who lives in the home where the class is being held writes something in Padma's notebook, then proceeds to collect money from a few of the women in the group. Amidst the mouth-watering aroma of tomato and sautéed onions I am left to wonder why Marcela is collecting money from some of the women present when I was informed that the class is free for the participants. From what I am able to decipher it seems that the OMM rented the large stove, but was only able to pay 100 quetzales, leaving a small amount

that needed to be covered by the women themselves. However, this doesn't explain why only some of the women are paying this fee.

Meanwhile, one of the women gathers the children, all girls, on the bench under the covered area to distribute some snacks while the rest of the women gather in the center of the room to learn the last steps of this cooking process. Padma takes pictures of the women as Spanish pop music from the kitchen replaces the jovial laughter and screaming of the children, now sitting quietly for the first time all day, enjoying their snack, the type of which escapes my notice. I'm simply relieved to have a break from the prying eyes and the playful screams of the kids. The animation that has become common among the women recedes as they channel all of their concentration on listening and complying with the instructor's final directions. However, there are still 4 women who are not involved with the final stages of the meal, continuing to relax by the large stove, conversing pleasantly and at times laughing uproariously with Padma and Juan. Once again, I am wondering if they are here more for the social aspect of the class than anything else. This elicits the question; do the women view the class as an important part of their day due to the social or economic connotations? Yet another question that remains a mystery.

It only takes the women about 10 minutes to finish the final steps, allowing them to gather on the benches and talk as the ingredients simmer in the large pot. The instructor stands in the center of the room talking to the women. Fortunately, I am able to translate enough of what she says to understand that she is taking the time to explain how long these classes are offered, with August 23<sup>rd</sup> being the last cooking

class. Then Marcela and the instructor interrupt the women's conversations to ask what they would like to learn in the classes to follow over the next few weeks. Though I am not able to decipher their ultimate answer to this question it becomes clear that the women have several ideas as they each throw in their two-cents on ingredients options. Every women participates in this discussion, I only wish that I could be so opinionated during my graduate courses. The women are obviously not only interested in what they are doing; they enjoy it and feel comfortable enough to speak freely in the group itself. Their comfort may arise from a variety of variables; cooking is an activity that each of these women conducts every day, so rather than learning an entirely new skill they are simply adding another layer to a foundation they already have. Also, the environment itself is open, with the sun shining down around their training arena, enveloping them and their children who are constantly laughing and running up and down the halls. At no point in time do the women demonstrate any conflict between their training and motherly duties because in this class they are one and the same. This means that the women maintain a sense of ownership and pride in what they are doing as well. During my 2 hour observation the women only seemed reserved and shy once, when I first arrived, and this reserve only lasted about 5 minutes as the women quickly became accustomed to my presence.

The conversation transitions, flowing from a discussion of future cooking possibilities to today's lesson, as the instructor lists the necessary ingredients to prepare the dish simmering away on the industrial stove, constantly being stirred by one of the women. Sitting on the bench among the women, Marcela transcribes the

instructor's words, and then once finished she hands the sheets out to the women, a reference for further use.

The conversation flows for another 10 minutes, contrasting with the Spanish polka now playing in the background and the screaming of the girls who have resumed their rambunctious activities, including a new favorite of running in and out of the house. At the end of the discussion a couple of the women remove the tomalitos from the large stove. Nearby, Juan records an interview with the instructor of the class, while the women begin talking in earnest, returning the room's atmosphere to one of jubilation. Suddenly, Marcela appears at my side to hand me a green tomalito on a tupperware lid. I can't help but think "Thank God" since I went from hungry to starving about an hour ago, a feeling exacerbated by the exquisite smells arising from the pans in front of me. I thank her, and begin to eat, having forgotten my previous concerns about the food, overcome by my hunger. A split second drum roll, all in my head of course, and a bite into the tomalito reveals how much I have been missing in the U.S. as this is not something made in any of the "Mexican or Latino" restaurants I have been to. It's delicious! Padma make an announcement that I miss since it competed with my sampling of the tomalito. Finally, the rest of the food is ready. The women begin distributing the food and passing it out. I am the first one to receive food followed by Padma, Juan and the instructor. I feel a mix of trepidation and relief, trepidation for being given the honor of being served first, as their cultural norms require, and the relief of finally having something of substance to stave my hunger. The rest of the women form a line in

front of the small stove to fill their tupperware containers with the rice and pork, covered in a tomato-garlic sauce, the result of their hard work. The food is great, causing me to reevaluate my initial feelings towards pork that's not bacon. Padma announces that the food is delicious. Juan follows her announcement with a joke that elicits laughter from all of the women. I, guiltily, say nothing since my Spanish still leans towards the unintelligible. Instead, I try to convey my pleasure through my facial expressions, as I am once again under the scrutiny of the women before me. Once I finish my meal I imitate Padma and go to the sinks to wash my plate and utensils, along with Juan's, as one of the women approaches me with three open soda bottles: one coke and two of something I am not familiar with, in a green bottle. I choose the coke, since it's the only soda I recognize, forgetting that it isn't a good idea to drink from glass bottles in Guatemala due to their not quite hygienic recycling program. I thank the woman, and drink the soda while Juan takes one of the other sodas and Padma opts for water instead. The women laugh and chat as meals and drinks are consumed. At the end of the meal Padma, Juan, and I thank the women for a wonderful meal and make our way back to the municipal building to work, 2 as government employees and 1 as a burgeoning anthropologist.

The cooking class, organized by the OMM, accomplishes something that should be an inherent part of education, fun. These women genuinely enjoy their time in the class where the women are both mothers and friends, and their kids are free to be kids. This class offers a compatible environment that opens up opportunities for socialization that the women do not have access to on a day to day basis as they have

responsibilities elsewhere. It can be an escape from the everyday mundane or difficult realities they are facing, particularly poverty and abuse. The women's ability to multitask in this class is impressive; at no point does anything suffer or is anything excluded, whether it is their children, the meal, or the social camaraderie that the women share. The OMM act as middle-women, per se, providing services and connections for collective learning and socialization, ultimately enhancing the lives of the women who participate regardless of the economic motives and consequences.

The cooking class allows women the chance to commiserate and interact in a space allocated for them, beyond the boundaries of the home, without the burden of their daily duties dominating their day. Outside of their own homes this may be one of the few places where these women are free to express themselves as they see fit, while still maintaining their role as mother to their children who run around happily screaming and laughing up and down the hall. Within this new place the OMM lays a foundation for the empowerment of women in the community, manipulating gender norms to teach them how to use these norms as a tool that promotes independence and solidarity simultaneously.

#### Manualidades: Training for the Sewing Trade

The second economic training program put into effect by the OMM is the manualidades, or crafts class, as mentioned by Padma during our conversation at the cooking class. The manualidades classes offer to teach women the proper techniques for creating items appealing to the thousands of tourists who visit Lake Atitlan every

year. This set of courses focuses on fabricating bolsas (purses) popular among Western tourists. Like the cooking classes, the manualidades classes offer not only a chance for economic enhancement, but also an opportunity to get out of the house and make new friends while maintaining old ones. The efforts of the OMM achieve these impressive feats, some intentional and some unintentional, despite financial straits that force the OMM to use shoddy machines and limited materials.

The heat of the sun and the sound of children playing on the weathered cement basketball court in the park slightly calm my frazzled nerves as I walk into the OMM at 8:00 in the morning. The office is empty, its wide open doors revealing the absence of both Padma and Gabriella, the OMM director. I walk back outside to sit on the bench right in front of the OMM and wait for one or both of them to arrive. Outside the large, normally empty, room to my left there are two women sitting at a table filled with a variety of prescription glasses. Upon taking a closer look I realize that directly inside the entrance is an ophthalmologist providing eye exams to the local residents, and beyond that is Padma with Laila and a man I have never seen before. As I maneuver myself unobtrusively past the ophthalmologist and his latest patient, into the back of the dim and dusty municipal room I notice that Padma and Laila are helping the man, Pedro, move some old-fashioned sewing machine desks to form 2 parallel rows in the back of the room. Three other women enter from a side door in the back and begin moving the sewing machines as I grab the other end of a desk to assist Padma. While we all work together to organize the desks at the back of this dimly lit and dirty room, Laila wipes off the ¼ inch of dust covering the desks

and their modern day mechanized spindles. We arrange 5 desks in the back of the room, 3 in front side by side, and the remaining two side by side behind the row of three, although in that moment there are only 3 women present for the beginning of the class.

As everyone chooses their desks, Padma returns to the office and Pedro steps aside to ask me if I would like to participate in the lesson. I struggle with my answer for a few seconds battling my desire to participate in the women's activities and my desire to be able to observe their class unencumbered by my own preoccupation and inexperience in the world of sewing. After thanking him for the offer I attempt to explain that I am there to observe. Despite my mortifyingly poor Spanish he seems to understand, nodding his head and returning to his class.

The next 15 minutes pass in a whirl of preparation as Pedro, whom I now recognize as the teacher of this class, chooses one of the sewing machines to demonstrate how to properly clean its essential components. At the end of this demonstration the 3 women who surrounded him disperse, each occupying a machine and applying the cleaning techniques they just observed. Meanwhile, I claim a chair on the sidelines to watch and take notes in my notebook. Laila grabs a chair from the side of the room and sits next me as the women clean their machines diligently; heads and shoulders bent forward concentrating on the task at hand. Pedro circles the women, commenting on their efforts and at times taking over to provide deeper cleaning. After about 10 minutes 2 more women walk in with a little boy. The



newcomers smile at the women already working at their stations, the elderly matron of the family stopping to hug a couple of the women.

Interestingly, this woman seems to be an important member of this group as she consistently interacts with each of the women. As she makes her rounds, her daughter, Anita, brings her son over to the side door, and takes out several toys from her cloth shoulder bag that includes a toy car. She whispers to her son, gesturing that he should remain by the door to play with his toys. In this class Carlos is the only child present, although the laughter of children can be heard occasionally behind the building outside. Unfortunately for Anita, Carlos does not stay next to the door, following his wind up car over to Laila, and then into the heart of the class, amidst the legs of the desks and the women. This occurs several times throughout the duration of the 90 minute course, requiring Anita to leave her machine to chase and chastise Carlos. In contrast to Anita, the other 4 women are not perturbed by Carlos, as they work, cleaning their machines. The other women in the class are older, from late 30s to early 60s, whereas Anita appears to be in her early 20s. The ages of these women might mean that their children are adults now with their own families. If that is the case this could explain why there are so few women participating in the class; they may just be occupied with the domestic duties common among women throughout Guatemala, but which the participants in this group may not be as burdened by. Although Anita is able to bring Carlos to the class she frequently leaves her machine to watch after him as he has a tendency to wander too close to the women and their machines or too far away from them, leaving the room at times, probably to find other

kids to play with. Perhaps the participation of more mothers who would bring their children to these classes might better enable the women to learn as the children play with each other. This arrangement seemed to work during the cooking class, although the setting was obviously very different. Regardless, the women create a balance between distractions and learning, never allowing one to dominate the other.

Due to the aged and damaged conditions of some of the sewing machines, cleaning and maintenance occupy the majority of class time, leaving only 15 minutes of actual sewing time for the women. Once the machines are repaired, Pedro, with Laila's assistance, explains and demonstrates how to thread the machines for use. Following Pedro's demonstration only 1 of the 5 women successfully threads her machine. The failed attempts by the other 4 women to connect the thread to the machine are met with collective and sporadic laughter. The only woman who succeeds in threading her machine without assistance is Rosalinda, who has been present from the beginning of the class. Her skill seems to be the result of previous experience, predicated on her easy sewing success despite her absence for several pieces of instruction while she left the room, at times returning with materials such as cloth.

Once the machines are all threaded properly, Pedro emphasizes the importance of sewing slowly as the women all begin to work on their own machines. Each of the women run into some difficulties as the thread gets caught in the machines, but rather than reacting with anger or frustration the difficulties just elicit more laughter in the group. Still, when the sewing machines are agreeable the women

take full advantage, dedicating themselves to absorbing the knowledge necessary to participate in this tourist-oriented trade. Amazingly, none of the women seem upset by the fact that the class meets with so many hurdles during the short period of time set aside for the session. While Pedro calmly and deftly fixes the machines as each one contains a defective piece of machinery, the women take time to talk with each other, as they wait for the opportunity to continue with the lesson.

Laila sits in a chair next to me during this process, though always alert to the needs of the women and Pedro, assisting in any way that she can. Although Laila's temporary position with the OMM ended the previous week Laila still takes the time to help Pedro, guiding the women's hands as they navigate the coalescence of thread and cloth. During her moments of rest Laila takes pictures of the women as they focus on learning this new trade. In an attempt to fill the silence and gain some insight into current circumstances I begin a conversation with Laila once she returns to her seat next to me. Our conversation reveals her dedication to the OMM, and thus the women of her town, as she explains her presence as a volunteer rather than an employee. I also learn that the classes are normally better attended by both women and children, at times containing 12 women in a single class. When asked, Laila postulates the reason for the shortage of women in the class is time, since the class is completely free. During our conversation Laila also reveals that the pictures she took at the beginning of the class are meant for a website that the OMM is working on. Though I did not ask what the website is for I believe its goal is to raise awareness and thus increase OMM funding, as my interview with Padma a couple weeks later reveals that

the OMM operates without a designated budget from the Guatemalan central government.

Laila's commitment to women in the community continues to impress me. Even with the absence of financial compensation Laila continues to work with the OMM to help local women improve their economic opportunities by freely sharing her knowledge and experience in these sewing classes. Her dedication persists despite her own financial straits and difficulties. As a Mayan woman, Laila needs a job to help support her family and herself, and yet she makes time to support others in her community who also struggle with economic burdens.

I finally discover the lesson's purpose at the end of class (having forgotten what Padma told me about the class previously) as Pedro displays Rosalinda's work for the day, a "spider web like circle" created with the thread on the white cloth provided during the class. Her design indicates a mastery of the machine that, as Pedro mentions, will allow the women to make things such as purses, similar to the one Rosalinda carries over her shoulder, an intricate product of her ability. Before the women leave Pedro ensures that each desk is labeled with each woman's name, allowing the women to talk and laugh as they prepare to leave for the day. Anita, Carlos, and the grandmother are among the first to leave the room about 15 minutes after the end of class, saying their goodbyes, hugging and shaking hands. The other women soon follow suit, chatting as they walk down the steps of the municipal building and through the park to the main street of the town, heading back to their families and their duties.

Without further research there is almost no way of telling how effective these courses will be at opening the economic door of opportunity, but the social solidarity developing between these women, or being maintained, is apparent. If these courses didn't exist women would miss an additional chance to interact, and leave behind others' expectations. Here their woes and responsibilities take a temporary hiatus, in favor of education, ease, and fun. Ultimately, this form of training preserves the sanctity of the home, while offering new meaning and purpose to the duties performed within it. In this atmosphere, traditional women's work becomes a viable means of income that doesn't require emigration, or sweat shop labor where women experience further economic abuse and sexual violence. Rather than drowning in a sea of exploitation women are empowered, riding the tides.

### Breaking-down Machismo

The following interview with Jose, the director of the local rehabilitation house, offers a glimpse at the possibilities of the OMM's impact outside of their economic training courses for women. It establishes a gendered perspective that speaks to the holistic attitudes of the OMM, seeking to help both women and men, rather than just women.

### Another Avenue for Social Cohesion

Upon my arrival at the rehabilitation house the director, Jose, immediately abandoned the project he was working on, spreading shellac paint over an end table

made of hard wood, painted with a bright sun rising over a lake. He leads me to his desk waiting to sit until I do. After I go through the proper anthropological exposition I ask my first question, “How did you get connected with the OMM?”

“The town is very small, and we have many needs here. Also, this is the only rehabilitation house in the community.” From this I determined that such a connection was necessary as a result of their limited resources, something that also burdens the OMM.

“Why are you working with the OMM rather than another office?”

“The office accepts the men, helps them.”

“How does the training that the men receive from the women help them?”

Due to my past experiences with the OMM I anticipated a response that would address an economic need; instead Jose responds, “It’s very important that they come here because there’s a lot of machismo here. Many men believe that only men can do things, but women are capable as well. The women help the men learn new things and this can help combat the machismo that is so common...especially...among men who have problems with drugs or alcohol.”

“What forms of training provided by the OMM have been successful?”

“Well, the men learn new things, things that men cannot normally do. The work they are doing now goes to children. They make flowers, clowns, and purses.” Something he didn’t mention was that the men use old materials to forge their crafts, recycling resources while learning a new trade.

The conversation continues for another couple of minutes but at this point Jose's propensity for mumbling takes over, rendering his responses useless since I can't hear a single word, even on the recorder I use in an attempt to avoid such auditory difficulties. Regardless, the interview proves fruitful, revealing that the OMM is a compassionate and holistic organization (within certain straits) as they include these men in their goals to improve the community, while others ignore them. In fact, outside of the OMM it is common to see people step over a drunk passed out on the sidewalk without missing a step or sparing a glance, as if he doesn't even exist.

The preceding interview outlines the most important discovery of the following narrative; the OMM undermines the effects of machismo with their work. They arrange for the women to train men who are ostracized by society. This interaction elicits mutual respect between these men and women as knowledge is shared rather than restricted.

#### Rehabilitation: An OMM Opportunity

The OMM's determination to reach out to everyone, regardless of sex, is an example of their multi-level approach to empowering women, a process that reinforces, or in some cases may even create, mutual understanding and compassion between the sexes as the men glimpse these women for who they are, honest, kind, and intelligent. The training they obtain from these women forces them to see, to look beyond the blinders of social norms plagued by machismo and racial prejudices. It forces them to reconcile bitter opinions of women with the women who assist them,

teaching them a new craft to barter for the resources they need during their rehabilitation. This can erode machismo and the misogynistic attitudes that have been one of the central factors affecting the high rates of domestic violence and femicide in Guatemala, forging stronger bonds between men and women that can hinder, and perhaps with time, eliminate these awful abuses that so many women experience.

In addition, by offering crafts training to the men at the town's local rehabilitation center, the OMM is providing the men with new ways to change their lives. The crafts allow the men to create items that the director of the program can use to barter for supplies that keep the center running. Thus, the OMM helps these men through their rehabilitation process by providing them with the skills to earn the resources necessary for the center's operations and their sobriety.

I can practically feel my own anticipation, that odd mix of anxiety and excitement, for my coming observation; my first planned observation as an anthropologist. When I arrive at the OMM I had planned to simply observe the operations of the OMM, to be a fly on the wall in the office itself. However, a few minutes after I arrive the tedium begins to kick in. Thankfully, Laila interrupts the tedium to explain that Padma is teaching a class at that very moment with "los companeros" (or mates). She tells me that Padma is in a different building and asks if I would like to go join her. Of course it takes several explanations before I understand her offer, but once I do I readily agree. This entire time I assume that I will get to witness one of the cooking classes I have heard about from previous conversations with Laila, and small snippets of telephone conversations in the OMM as they went



about arranging them. Laila takes me down the steps of the municipal to a bright yellow tuk tuk, providing him with the destination. As we make our way down the familiar streets of the town my heart thumps erratically until we stop in front of the large, red, metal double door entrance of a grey brick building that I walk past, without a thought, every day.

The tuk tuk driver refuses the 3 quetzales, the typical payment for a tuk tuk ride through the town. I thank the driver before knocking timidly on the door. Like a scene from the Wizard of Oz, a man opens one of the metal windows to peer at me. He smiles and without saying a word he, patiently waits for me to say something regarding my presence. I finally manage to say Padma's name, just as I see her a couple yards behind him. Still smiling, my Wizard of Oz impersonator nods, closes the window and with a click opens the locked door. Until then I did not realize that the door was locked. Although incidents of crime in Guatemala are frequent, when the house is occupied doors generally remain unlocked, and it was obvious the moment I walked in that there were several people in this nondescript building. Thus, what could the reason be for locking the door? The second thing I noticed was that Padma was the only woman in the office portion of this building. This threw me off guard a little as I assumed that a cooking class would be dominated exclusively by women, while I found the opposite in the building. I soon discovered the reason for this. This was not a cooking class. I was in the town's rehabilitation center for men recovering from drug and alcohol abuse.

The reality of the situation was completely different from what I anticipated. I went there assuming that I would get to see a cooking class. At the very least I assumed that since I was studying the operations of the Office of Women, women would be the key component of my observations. Instead, I find not only am I not going to observe a cooking class, I'm not even going to be observing women. Regardless, I am still excited for the opportunity. Obviously, the OMM doesn't just care about the women in the community, but rather they care about the community at large.

Walking into the building I find that the surroundings are sparse, with homemade crafts distributed around the room. In the corner, a door leads to yet another room for wood working, leading to a large patio area where about 30 men sit learning how to make crafts, with the assistance of 2 young women. I follow the director of the rehabilitation center, Jose, through each room as he explains the purpose of the house, to provide rehabilitation for local men recovering from alcoholism and drug abuse. With the basics out of the way Jose assures me that I am perfectly safe there, smiling the whole time, as if he is in on a joke that I am unaware of, which could certainly be the case since I only understand about 30% of what he says. Padma quickly adds that the reason for her presence is due to the fact that the OMM is trying to help these men get jobs after they leave the clinic. She also explains to Jose that I have a hard time understanding Spanish, to which I nod emphatically in agreement. Jose asks me if I would like to meet the men, and despite my nerves I agree. While we wait in the wood carving room for an appropriate

moment to interrupt the men and their activities, Jose asks me what I study. However, since I am a little flustered it takes me a bit to understand, and while waiting for my answer Jose asks another man to join us. A young man about my age enters the room in a well-worn casual outfit, a t-shirt, jeans and sneakers.

After he joins Jose and I in the room, while Padma talks on her phone, Jose seems to feel it is safe to begin to ask me questions. He asks me where I'm from, and where my family is. The young man translates each question for me in turn, exposing the reason Jose brought him in on our conversation, to facilitate communication. Although this was possibly the one and only time that I was able to understand the questions without assistance. I answer each question to the best of my strained ability, until we are able, along with Padma, to step into the patio area where the men sit making crafts at a large wooden table not quite large enough to accommodate the number of men staying in the rehabilitation center. The scene would be almost homey if not for the high cement walls surrounding us, lined with circled barbed wire, preventing anyone from coming or going.

The men ages range from 17-65, and most of their clothes have seen better days. The older they are it seems the more dirt covers their clothing, and of course, the more weathered their skin. The men's eyes, while obviously tired, reflect a certain hope as they learn their new craft. Jose calls for the attention of the men to introduce me, as a student of anthropology working with the Office of Women, and Padma, the director of the Office of Women. He elaborates, saying that the presence of the 2 women, who have been assisting the men for several days, came at the bequest of the

Office of Women. Padma takes over with her own speech as the men and 2 women listen respectfully reiterating much of what Jose said as another man joins the group. In contrast to the men around me this man's immaculate clothing indicates his middle class status, as does his ability to speak English. He explains that his sister, Padma, called him requesting his help as a translator. I thank them both, feeling relieved to have help communicating, and yet after he finishes translating her speech he leaves the center. Once again I am at the mercy of my own limited devices.

Unexpectedly, Jose offers me the opportunity to ask the men some questions. Unfortunately, I feel the need to decline since I did not know that I was going to be there and had nothing prepared. Without preparation I have an extremely difficult time enacting the verbal interactions necessary for not only basic communication, but for anthropological research as well, so I explain that I don't have any but that I might later. He smiles politely and nods, then says something that makes me think that it is now my turn to make my own speech as Jose, Padma, the men and the 2 women watch and wait expectantly for me to say something. I am thrown because I can't think of anything else to say that hasn't already been said about me and my visit. Ironically, it is at this point, when I am most uncomfortable, that Jose begins to take pictures of me and Padma with his phone. My nervous smile is a constant feature in these photos. Left with little other choice I decide to just repeat what has been said, though ineloquent; that I am a cultural anthropology student from the U.S, I study in Kalamazoo, MI, and I am in Guatemala for an anthropology program. I end with further thanks for welcoming me to the center.

The men clap at the end of my “speech”, for lack of a better word, then Jose asks me to write down my name and email address on a piece of paper. Though I am curious I write the information down without question. Shoving my information into his pocket the men make room for the women so that Jose can take additional pictures. The men seem completely complacent where the pictures are concerned, so I assume that photos are a regular occurrence in the center. Regardless, the number of pictures indicates that there is a purpose behind it, rather than just being taken for posterity sake. Before I am able to ponder this further Jose finishes his pictures and moves back to the office leaving the women and men to resume their conversations and activities, with me standing awkwardly the corner. To avoid feeling awkward, I quickly extract my notebook to take notes just as Jose comes back outside and asks me to join him in the office. I follow him and as I approach the computer he directs me to, I realize that the information I wrote down earlier was meant to locate my Facebook profile so that he could “friend” me. This quickly done Jose then begins to talk about pictures and folders on the computer. After a couple of minutes I realize that Jose hopes I can help him move the pictures from the camera onto a thumb drive that belongs to Padma, who joins us at the desk. Unfortunately, my frazzled nerves hinder my ability to decipher the Spanish translation of the computer’s start menu that would enable me to help him, leading Padma to recruit one of the women from outside to help instead. Within 10 minutes the transfer is complete and the woman takes her leave, returning to the men outside.

Jose and Padma take the next 15 minutes to discuss the rehabilitation center. Their conversation examines the difficulties that the center encounters; namely those of financial consequence. Jose laments over the practically nonexistent assistance available in the region and across Guatemala in general, emphasizing the neglect of churches in the rehabilitation process. They also discuss people's high susceptibility to substance abuse in comparison to the lack of available funding and support in Guatemala, contrasting such dismal assistance with what he assumes to be available in other countries, such as the U.S. and France. They do not discuss the taboo position of drug and alcohol addicts in society, but it seems to radiate around the conversation, an invisible piece of the financial puzzle. Of course, it would be fair to say that that all organizations in the community experience a lack of funding as a result of economic hardships and corrupt government policies that limit the number of available resources. As the conversation dissolves Padma gathers her purse and exchanges thanks with Jose for both his work with the men and courtesy towards us. I leave the rehabilitation center with a plan to return the following Friday to take advantage of Jose's open invitation for my return, and the satisfaction of knowing that although the sum of the day's surprises might have given someone with a weak heart a heart attack, I survived. In fact, I prospered.

The training that the OMM provides the men at the local rehabilitation center has distinct consequences. The first is to help the men learn new crafts to enable their recovery process. The other, more indirect consequence demonstrates to the men, some of whom abide by the cultural attitudes that treat women as borderline useless

outside the home, how capable and intelligent women are as women. They are not just mothers or wives; they are esteemed members of society whose abilities are valuable beyond the confines of the private sphere, elevating the duties that have been demeaned so frequently before. The appreciation that arises from such interactions establishes a common ground for social solidarity between these men and women, brokering a kind a peace based on respect rather than dominance.

## CHAPTER III

### CONCLUSION

#### Final Thoughts

The most crucial element of this investigation concerns ideas of empowerment. Empowerment embodies a plethora of aspects that affect women across the globe, but all of these aspects revolve around women's autonomy (Harcourt and Escobar, 2005). Importantly, these notions of empowerment operate within a neoliberal paradigm where autonomous action is the same as individual determination. Thus, as products of the neoliberal system that creates and reinforces the marginalization of women and indigenous groups, empowerment programs teach these groups how to make the best out of horrible situations. On occasion these programs will improve people's circumstances, although they fail to challenge the system that perpetuates vicious cycles of discrimination. Women should be able to do whatsoever they choose as autonomous individuals, they should be able to determine how they go about their lives rather than struggling to survive (Alvarez and Dagnino eds, 1998). However, this is not a perfect world. Women experience consistent obstacles which restrict their rights and cause them harm, restrictions established and enforced by law, and other institutions, making them seem normal, and thus difficult to change. Of course, women have found ways to overcome such obstacles by creating spaces that contest the foundations of neoliberalism. For instance, "alternative social movement 'publics'", in the words of Alvarez and Dagnino, are



networks of communication established by and between subaltern people, those excluded from the system and persecuted as if the structural propensities that engender bigotry and neglect do not exist (1998; 19). These networks monitor the power of the state, and create a different kind of power relation, one that challenges the state, and creates a balance that empowers group's previously ostracized (Alvarez and Dagnino eds, 1998). Such arrangements normally arise from social movements; however, the situation in La Laguna is different.

In order to understand the circumstances of present day La Laguna a brief discussion of power relations, or interactional hierarchies, is required as it applies to the OMM's contextual framework. Relationships and interactions are part of a series of power struggles (Alvarez and Dagnino, ed, 1998), particularly those between men and women, and those between Ladinos and indigenous groups. These relationships create notions of "place" (Harcourt and Escobar, ed, 2005) at multiple levels of interaction, "the body, household, neighborhood city, [as well as on] national, and global scales" (Harcourt and Escobar, ed, 2005; 96) each intersecting the other. Recognition is a crucial part of power relations and consequently can be either negative, a common consequence of relationships that women encounter at each of these societal scales, or positive. One of the most problematic interactions arises at the national level in the form of citizenship. Each country has residents who may be divided into 2 basic categories; citizen and non-citizen. Obviously, those who occupy the category of "non-citizen" have little to no rights within the country they reside. In contrast, "citizens" have greater access to available resources and government

assistance. However, even within the category of “citizen” many people are treated as second-class residents who merit only minimal acknowledgement in political, economic, and social domains (Alvarez and Dagnino, ed, 1998). Historical prejudices, namely colonial prejudices, combine with neoliberal philosophies to blame the individual for problems that are globally prevalent, in particular that of poverty and issues that impacted by poverty, such as domestic violence and civil unrest. By promoting the individual as the determining factor of each person’s destiny it becomes the individual’s problem. This elicits an expectation, that each person is responsible for pulling themselves up by their boot straps (if they are fortunate enough to have boots at all) to improve their lives, or to drown in their own misery as a result of their own inferiorities. This expectation has become a part of society’s “common sense” (Zizek, 2008), ideas that have global repercussions, as more and more countries become economically intertwined transforming cultural notions into hybridist ideals, incorporating neoliberal tendencies, spanning across oceans and hemispheres (Alvarez and Dagnino, ed, 1998).

The globalization process compounds the marginalization of women, especially those who are indigenous, as neoliberal philosophies are adopted in societies to reinforce civil rights abuses, elevating men above women and Ladinos above indigenous peoples, wrapped in a veil of “common sense”, to borrow Zizek’s term (2008). The responses to my community questionnaire reveal the strength of these notions in La Laguna with 10/15 (67%) of women responding yes to the question “Do women and men have equal rights in La Laguna?” In contrast, 5/8

(63%) of men who were asked the same question responded no, some of them thinking the question so ludicrous that they laughed through their response. The men's laughter was not an indication that they objected to women having equal rights, but rather a testimony to the high discrepancy between men's and women's rights in the country. Thus, the mindset of people in La Laguna is different. Many of the women do not recognize that they do not have equal rights, although as demonstrated in Padma's and Victoria's interviews, and in research conducted by Victoria Sanford and other social scientists, violence against women, and structural negligence towards gendered violence is rampant in Guatemala.

Even the government recognizes that women are marginalized, thus the creation of the OMM. Perhaps, initially created as a "dimension of economic neoliberalism... a 'social adjustment'... a social program" developed as a social experiment for the rich to conduct on the poor, my research indicates that there are benefits in the form of social solidarity (Alvarez and Dagnino, ed, 1998; 22) Although Alvarez , Dagnino, and Escobar may view the solidarity promoted in these programs as just another element of a classist marionette play, I believe that the power of social solidarity should not be underestimated. After all, most social movements and changes occur under the banner of solidarity as people create alternative avenues to living that break from social norms. The OMM forges a new space for social cohesion between women, a stepping-stone that may lead to the generation of a collective consciousness against their marginalized position from

within a neoliberal structure, from within the belly of the beast (Harcourt and Escobar, ed, 2005).

To be clear, I am not the foreign anthropologist coming to Guatemala to tell women that they suffer, but the words of my informants and other scholars cannot be ignored. There are most certainly discrepancies between men and women in Guatemala where rights are concerned; even most of the men acknowledge that fact. Interestingly, even though most of the women indicated that they believe men and women to be equal, when asked if women should have more rights 11/15 said yes. If the rights they have are sufficient then why would they feel the need for more? Thus, their response to the second question seems to indicate that they do know that there are rights they do not reap. The activities of the OMM help create an atmosphere conducive to the generation of collective knowledge and action. This atmosphere doesn't have a single set location; rather it adjusts to a variety of physical settings based on the economic activity being presented at that time. Aspects that each gathering shares includes a sense of understanding and ease where women can feel completely comfortable and confident in the safety of their surroundings. Thus, the OMM acts as a conduit for the further development of women's place and social empowerment.

However, it is important to note that with or without the OMM, women are not just helpless victims, they are agents of their own world, maneuvering through the infrastructures that oppress them. They struggle, and they survive against a system that could easily destroy them if they decided to surrender to the extreme inequalities

that the hegemony ascribes to. Survival as a form of agency is a strength that many women demonstrate daily (Alvarez and Dagnino, ed, 1998). The OMM simply helps them channel that agency and take it a step further to transform the domestic sector into an essential piece of the public sector, opening a new avenue for women's empowerment and greater equality between men and women.

To elaborate, sewing and cooking are tasks which women are expected to know before they enter these classes, as they are part of a gendered division of labor, labor conducted as a part of women's domestic routines. The OMM puts a spin on tradition by teaching these women how to adapt these tasks to occupy commercial niches supported by Ladinos and foreign tourists. For instance, in the sewing classes the women learn how to make bolsas, or purses. These purses are a very popular part of the tourist industry that is prevalent throughout Guatemala, especially around Lake Atitlan. In fact, I purchased three different purses while I was living in La Laguna. In order to make these purses the women need to know how to use a sewing machine. Thus, this class focuses on teaching them how to use the sewing machine with this purpose in mind. Before attending this course it's likely that the women already know how to sew by hand, so that they can repair damaged or worn-out clothing rather than having to buy new items. This class expands their knowledge of sewing to include a commercial dimension of sewing into their repertoire. The OMM enables women to use their domestic experience, and enhance it into a valuable skill within the public sector, as an avenue for improving their chances for financial security.

Similarly, the cooking classes provided and organized by the OMM, subtly

alter the women's knowledge of cooking by teaching them how to cook something that they would not normally consider, a meal oriented toward the Ladino population. This new knowledge lays the foundation for potential employment at a local comedor, or in the home of a local Ladino family as a domestic servant. This orientation towards Ladinos is very important because in the area Ladinos are some of the only people who have enough money to spend on going out to eat, or on domestic servants. In La Laguna, many of the Ladino families have domestic servants. Lana, the domestic servant employed by my host family, would cook, clean, and even babysit from time to time. Although cooking was not her only task it was an important one. Lana went to the market each day for fresh ingredients to make lunch, and pick up snacks for the household. I predicate my assumption on my observations of Lana's work in the home of my host family, assuming that many other domestic servants are also expected to cook meals that differ from what these women are used to, since they cannot afford the same types of food that their employers enjoy. Meals among indigenous groups normally consist of some of the cheapest items available; eggs, black beans, and hand-made flour tortillas for breakfast, lunch and dinner. In contrast, Ladinos make and have more money, affording a more diverse array of foods including meats, vegetables, and different pastas. Ultimately, the OMM provides valuable training in other areas of cooking and sewing new to indigenous women, which has the potential to economically benefit its participants.

## The Strengths of the OMM

This section seeks to answer the questions originally posed in the introduction, addressing the utility of the OMM. Although my research supplements answers to these questions it is important to note that due to deficiencies in time and language capabilities many of my findings include facets of speculation. Thus, my answers are not definitive, but rather an analysis of what might be. I believe that my research provides a solid basis for the further investigation of the utility of the OMM as they deal with the birthing pains of their recent conception. Although they do not directly address the systemic inequalities that plague women throughout Guatemala, indigenous women in particular, they create new spaces that allow these women to come together to learn, to grow and develop social solidarity that has the potential to spark movements that might change the systemic inequalities they face. Of course, this last statement relies largely on my hope for future developments in the OMM. Due to time and language constraints the results of this research are not quantifiable. Instead the results rely heavily on qualitative data that depict a trend aiming for women's empowerment, at the individual level, a contradiction to empowerment on a systemic level.

*Does the OMM offer tangible social, economic, and/or political improvements to the lives of women?*

The answer to this is two-fold, yes and no. The OMM cannot guarantee employment for the women who participate in the economic training courses, the

organizations main tool for helping women in the town. Perhaps the most practical result of the OMM's economic training courses is the formation of social solidarity that develops between the participants of the training programs. The social bonds forged between the women allow them to feel safe, comfortable, and ultimately secure in their learning environment, enabling them to learn more efficiently. As their comprehension of these new skills increases, presumably, so does their confidence in themselves. In this regard, the courses promote social interactions that might not be available to these women outside of the home, their designated cultural domain. Of course, for many of these women economic participation is a necessity as a result of high levels of poverty, and a poor economy. Thus, they are left with no choice but to transgress cultural suppositions that prefer their domestic seclusion as there are limited employment options open to women, forming spaces of inclusion to counteract the social norm of seclusion.

Furthermore, as studies on social movements indicate, the conditions that allow these women to gather outside of the home, and empower them (individual initiative), also promote a reinterpretation of their place in society. Hopefully, women will begin not only to question their oppression, but begin to take steps to move towards inclusion at all levels of society. Right now there are women in La Laguna, and across Guatemala, who know that they are marginalized; they know that there are high incidents of femicide, though they would not use that term, but they do not organize to change it. It is difficult to organize when cultural norms depict the domicile as a feminine space, while all other arenas are depicted as masculine



avenues of interaction. This change from seclusion to inclusion may prompt women to begin to question their exclusion from society, to question and critique, as a group, the abuse that so many women suffer on a daily basis. If enough women begin to question, to object, then changes can truly take effect in society, but they need a place from which to begin. That is the groundwork that the OMM lays out, the circumstances which are necessary to begin to implement progressive changes for the empowerment of women.

*Does the OMM promote the economic security of women in this community?*

The answer to this question depends on how one defines “security”. If the definition of “security” means to ensure that the women will obtain employment after the cooking or sewing classes, then the answer must be no. To my knowledge the OMM has no connections with local businesses that might hire these women, which would provide them with economic security, although I must admit that I do not know what precisely the women hope to obtain from the OMM’s training courses. In contrast, if we define security as establishing a foundation to enable women to obtain employment then the answer to the question is yes, within the cultural constraints still influenced by structural discrimination. Without the training opportunities that the OMM provides the women would not have the requisite knowledge to enable them to participate in the economy, whether it be the formal or informal sector.

The OMM teaches the women to take the skills they already have, such as cooking and sewing, in a new direction, as a tool for economic prosperity by applying

them to work outside of the home. As a predominantly indigenous community, many of the women in the town are indigenous, specifically Kakchiquel, who would not know how to make certain recipes or crafts that are not part of their normal domestic activities. The foods they learn to make are directed towards a Ladino diet that includes more meats and sauces, items which are lacking in indigenous diets. Indigenous meals are much cheaper than meals that include meat and various sauces. With these experiences as a part of their background they will increase their chances of obtaining employment as a domestic worker in a Ladino home, or as a cook in a comedor, the small restaurants that cater to local Ladino tastes.

The sewing classes enables them to work sewing machines, which provides them with the skills and technique necessary to operate a sewing machine to quickly produce tourist-oriented crafts popular among foreigners. Although tourists are not common in La Laguna, there are towns as close as a 20 minute pickup drive which thrive off tourism. These towns attract millions of people from all around the world each year. One can find several stands dedicated to bolsas of bright colors and various patterns on a single block of a single street, in a market that spans several blocks on several streets. Items, such as bolsas and table runners, require the use of a sewing machine in order to make a profit, as doing them by hand would take too much time and cut into the production of those products. With this training the women would be able to participate in a small town collective, working together to make these products, sharing the costs and benefits of their economic participation.

During my 7 weeks in La Laguna I only observed one consistent form of

employment available to women, work as a vendor, selling food or wares in the local marketplace. Each town has its own open, outside market that consists of multiple booths containing a variety of foods, textiles, shoes, and other items. Outside of the marketplace there are very few economic opportunities available to women.

Ultimately, the training provided by the OMM enables their ability to participate in the marketplace, work in a local restaurant, or work for a local Ladino family as a domestic servant, positions that they may not have had access to previously, but now may seem more accessible than before. With all of these benefits in mind it is reasonable to conclude that the OMM offers a step toward economic security (rather than ensuring economic security) and promise for the future.

*Does the OMM set a foundation that undermines the subservient status of women by providing them with opportunities to enhance their economic circumstances? How so?*

In regards to this question I believe that the answer is yes, but strictly as an underpinning for change. The OMM provides training, to both men and women, which prove women capable, with an aptitude for economic participation in the arenas of the public sector where men tend to be less knowledgeable. The training that the OMM organizes for the men at the local rehabilitation center establish and reinforce the development of social ties between the men, as students, and the women, as teachers, to produce social solidarity between members of two marginalized groups (women and drug addicts), to create a space better-suited to equal economic interactions. These courses that place women in positions of

knowledge, which they share with the men, demonstrates the strength and competence of these women outside of the private sphere. Such evidence contradicts the views traditionally held by so many men, especially those who suffer from drug dependence and abuse, as I was informed by Jose, the director of the rehabilitation center.

An unintentional consequence of these interactions may be termed as “combat[ing] machismo”, to borrow Jose’s words. By opening its doors to men as well, the OMM sets the stage for further change in gendered interactions. In my interview with Jose, when I asked him how the training arranged by the OMM helps the men he responded,

“It is very important that they come here because there’s a lot of machismo here. Many men believe that only men can do things, but women are capable as well. The women help the men learn new things and this can help combat the machismo that is so common...especially...among men who have problems with drugs or alcohol”.

In their interactions with the rehabilitation center the OMM acts as a medium, contacting women who have time to teach, to dedicate a couple of hours each day, for 15 days, to help the men make crafts that they can barter for supplies, enabling the center to function. The rehabilitation center doesn’t receive federal funding; surviving on a barter system that trades home-made items for the minimal resources they require to keep their doors open to those struggling with substance abuse.

The OMM simultaneously organize the cooking and sewing classes directed solely towards women, while assisting the men at the rehabilitation center. Regardless of the assistance they provide to the men, whose crafts were produced with a distinct purpose (for bartering), separate from the commercial training received by the women, the OMM never ceases to help local women. Ultimately, the OMM's economic training courses forge friendships that place men and women on equal footing, a situation that may be able to transverse these brief interactions to become ingrained into daily socializations, and garner proper respect for women.

#### Questions for the Future

Due to limits in language proficiency and time there were many questions that arose throughout the research process which might have enabled a more comprehensive examination of the OMM, but which I found myself incapable of asking. Questions addressing success rates and the OMM's ultimate goal in assisting women would offer further valuable insights into the tangible affect that the OMM has on the statuses of women in the community. Furthermore, it would be interesting to talk with the female participants in focus groups to determine how the participants heard about and became engaged with the OMM. At this point I know that the OMM brings the women together, but I am not sure exactly how initial contacts are made, or what factors determine the women's attendance in the economic training courses. Additional information about workshops, and questions concerning women's rights might also reveal the intentions of the OMM and the feasibility of such plans, as these

were topics frequently mentioned but never really discussed in great detail. This may have been in large part because my informants thought that I wouldn't be able to understand them anyway.

Another question that needs to be addressed is why the OMM doesn't receive a budget and how exactly the budgets of the various municipal offices compare to one another. Also, how much contact does the OMM have with the central government? Does the government regulate their actions and movements? Do they provide the OMM with any guidelines for achieving the goals listed in the manual? And when it comes to the economic training activities, what are the women talking about? What is their contagious laughter about? Finally, what do the women's families think of the workshops? In particular, are their husbands supportive of their participation, or do they object to this new avenue of education and interaction? With more time my Spanish and my relationships with people throughout the town would have improved, allowing for more probing and developed questions with a wider variety of people.

Regardless of the language and time limitations, I believe my research reveals that the OMM operates as a conduit for the future empowerment of women in La Laguna. Though the OMM encounters constraints that arise from their neoliberal model and limited funding they still manage to help women. The OMM offers new economic niches that expand domestic duties beyond the boundaries of the home, while establishing places of social solidarity to allow the development of a new community, a community based on inclusion rather than exclusion.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1

#### Questions for Women in the Cooking Class (CC)

1. Que tan util para su futuro es la informacion que usted aprendio hoy?  
A. Muy util    B. Poco util    C. Nada util    D. Tal Vez    E. No se
2. Como se entero acerca de estas clases?  
A. Alguien de la Oficina    B. De boca en boca  
C. De un amigo o miembro de la familia    D. Un volante    E. Otra
3. Recomendaria esta clase a un amigo?  
A. Si    B. No    C. Tal Vez    D. No se
4. Sabia usted acerca de la Oficina de la Mujer antes de esta clase?  
A. Si    B. No
5. Ha ido a otras clases patrocinado por la Oficina de la Mujer?  
A. Si (Cual es)  
B. No
6. Has ido a la Oficina de la Mujer?  
A. Si    B. No    C. Si, pero mucho tiempo pasado
7. Siente que ha recibido una ayuda adecuada en la Oficina de la Mujer? Se siente bien atendido?  
A. Si  
B. No (Por que?)
8. Cree que la Oficina es bien conocida por la mayoria de las mujeres de San Lucas?  
A. Si    B. No
9. La Oficina de la Mujer ha ayudado a muchas mujeres en San Lucas?  
A. Si    B. No    C. Tal vez    D. No se
10. Cuantos anos tiene?
11. Cual es su etnicidad?

## Appendix 2

### Questions for the Men of the Casa Hogar Rehabilitation Center (CHR)

1. Que usted aprendio en las capacitaciones impartida por la Oficina de la Mujer?  
A. Muchas habilidades utiles  
B. Pocas habilidades utiles  
C. Nada habilidades utiles  
D. No se
2. Disfruta las clases impartidas por las mujeres de la oficina de la mujer?  
A. Si B. No C. Solamente un poco D. No se
3. Sabia usted acerca de la Oficina de la Mujer antes de esta clase?  
B. Si B. No
4. Has ido a la Oficina de la Mujer?  
B. Si B. No C. Si, pero mucho tiempo pasado
5. Cree que la Oficina es bien conocida por la mayoria de las mujeres de San Lucas?  
A. Si B. No
6. La Oficina de la Mujer ha ayudado a muchas mujeres en San Lucas?  
A. Si, muchas mujeres  
B. Solamente pocas mujeres  
C. Ningunas mujeres  
D. Tal vez  
E. No se
7. Cuantos anos tiene?
8. Cual es su etnicidad?



## Appendix 3

### Questions for General Community Member

1. Las mujeres y los hombres tienen igualdad de derechos en San Lucas?  
A. Si B. No C. Tal vez D. No se
2. Las mujeres deberían tener más derechos?  
A. Si B. No C. Tal vez D. No se
3. Hay una Oficina de la Mujer en San Lucas?  
A. Si B. No C. Tal vez D. No se E. No se, y no me importa
4. Has ido a la Oficina de la Mujer?  
C. Si B. No C. Si, pero mucho tiempo pasado
5. ¿Cuál es el propósito de la oficina de la mujer?  
A. Para dar a las mujeres puestos de trabajo  
B. Para ayudar a mejorar las vidas de las mujeres en San Lucas  
C. Para ayudar a la comunidad  
D. No se
6. Cree que la Oficina es bien conocida por la mayoría de las mujeres de San Lucas?  
A. Si B. No
7. La Oficina de la Mujer ha ayudado a muchas mujeres en San Lucas?  
A. Si, muchas mujeres B. Solamente pocas mujeres C. Ningunas mujeres D. Tal vez E. No se
8. Usted está conectado a un grupo que trabaja en colaboración con la Oficina de la Mujer?  
A. Si (¿Cuál es el nombre del grupo?)  
B. No  
C. Si, pero mucho tiempo pasado (¿Cuál es el nombre del grupo?)
9. ¿Cuántos años tiene?
10. ¿Cuál es su etnicidad?

11. Cuanto tiempo ha vivido en San Lucas?

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