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Women cooperatives: Analyzing women's empowerment processes in rural Nicaragua

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Abstract

In Nicaragua, the machismo culture is built on patriarchal values that sustain gender inequalities. This is especially visible in rural areas where women farmers lack the same opportunities and access to resources as men have. Organizing in cooperatives can therefore be a way for women to be stronger and create power together. With this background, I look at how organizing in cooperatives for women challenges existing structures and affects their empowerment process. I seek to broaden the understanding of rural women in cooperatives' lives, by exploring two communities in South Western Nicaragua, using in-depth interviews as the main method. Most of both cooperatives' members based their agriculture on organic principles and had rural agrotourism as one of their main activities. To create a space for the women to escape the machismo culture, both cooperatives only allowed women as members. Many of the women in the two cooperatives had previously been denied freedom by their life-partners in particular and the cooperative was an arena for them to build confidence with other women, to challenge what hindered them from making decisions in their own lives. This research shows that, after becoming active members in a cooperative, many of the women experienced having access to more resources and being able to make strategic life-choices. The level of empowerment varied between members, depending on ownership to projects, whether the project is adopted or not and support from life-partners.

Keywords: women, empowerment, cooperatives, gender, power relations, Nicaragua

Abstrakt

I Nicaragua er machismo-kulturen bygget på patriarkalske verdier som er med på å holde ujevnheter mellom kjønnene oppe. Dette er spesielt synlig i rurale områder der kvinnelige bønder ikke har de samme mulighetene og tilgangen på ressurser som det menn har. Organisering i kooperativer kan derfor være en mulighet for kvinner til å sammen bygge styrke og selvtillit. Med denne bakgrunnen vil jeg i denne oppgaven se på hvordan organisering i kooperativer for kvinner kan utfordre eksisterende strukturer og bidra i kvinners empowerment-prosess. Jeg ønsker å utvide forståelsen av rurale kvinner i kooperativers liv ved å utforske to kvinnekooperativer sørvest i Nicaragua, og ved å bruke dybdeintervjuer som hovedmetode. De fleste av kooperativenes medlemmer drev jorden økologisk og hadde agroturisme som hovedbeskjeftigelser. For å unnsnippe machismo-kulturen, tillot begge kooperativene kun kvinner som medlemmer. Mange av kvinnene i de to kooperativene hadde tidligere blitt nektet frihet av deres livspartnere, og kooperativet var en arena for å bygge selvtillit sammen med andre kvinner for å kunne utfordre strukturene som hindret dem i å ta avgjørelser i eget liv. Mange av kvinnene, etter å ha blitt aktive medlemmer i et kooperativ, opplevde å ha tilgang til flere ressurser og kunne ta strategiske livsvalg. Nivået av empowerment varierte mellom medlemmene, avhengig av blant annet eierskap til eller hvem som har satt rammene for initiativene og potensiell støtte fra livspartnere.

Nøkkelord: kvinner, empowerment, kooperativer, maktrelasjoner, Nicaragua



Figure 1: Illustration photo of a cooperative member's decorative garden (Photo: Caroline Berntsen).

“Before, I was not able to plant anything or have my own garden. But now I do, and I feel good. The way the garden is, that’s how I feel.”

– Karen, cooperative member

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Introduction

Achieving gender equality¹ is still a worldwide challenge and its absence a hindrance for development (UN, 2016). Many women lack opportunities for education and paid work, access to health care facilities and other vital resources and services. Women are also underrepresented in politics and in leadership positions and many face violence on a regular basis (UN, 2012).

With few exceptions, rural women face more challenges than urban women and men (UN, 2012). Culturally, many rural women have unpaid responsibilities in food production, household maintenance and care work that largely hinder their freedom. This restricts them from being a part of the formal economy (UN, 2012) and results in rural women being especially vulnerable and suffering more from poverty (CARE, 2016b).

To achieve gender equality, women's empowerment is by many organizations recognized as an invaluable approach (CARE, 2016c; UN, 2016). Major international organizations, such as the UN, have put gender equality and women's empowerment on their agenda through the Millennium Development Goals (Smyth, 2007) and more recently through the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2016). Focusing on women is therefore one of the keys to overcome poverty and hunger (CARE, 2016b; UN, 2012).

Evidence show that being empowered is beneficial not only for the women themselves, but for their whole family (UN, 2012). For example, as rural women in many cases handle food production, they play a crucial role in ensuring their family's food security² (UN, 2012). Furthermore, economically empowered women are vital for the health of their children. In Central America a child is 1,8 times less likely to suffer from underweight if their mother has access to financial resources (UN, 2012). This is because mothers tend to spend money on things that meet their family's needs, often in contrast to fathers (UN, 2012)

Organizing in cooperatives for rural women can be a way to empowerment (Bacon, 2010; FAO, 2012; Kroeker, 1995; Rowlands, 1997). Through better access to agricultural inputs, market connections, credit and capital, women farmers can improve the food security for themselves and their families. Cooperatives can also develop rural women's social network

¹ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defines gender equality as "when women and men enjoy equal rights, opportunities and entitlements in civil and political life" (FAO, 2016b, para. 11)

² Food security is "when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (as cited in De Schutter, 2013, p. 5).

and be an area for support and solidarity. Through a cooperative, women can get a voice in decision-making and improve their self-esteem (FAO, 2012). This is relevant also in a Nicaraguan context as the country experiences challenges with gender equalities.

Background - The Nicaraguan context

Nicaragua is a democratic country in Central America bordering Honduras in the north, and Costa Rica in the south. Nicaragua has a tropical climate in the lowlands and a temperate in the highlands. The country experiences two seasons: a dry season from November to April, and a wet season from May to October. However, there are often dry periods within the wet season (Segnestam, 2009), which poses challenges for the country's agriculture.

As Nicaragua was a Spanish colony for more than 300 years, the official language is Spanish, and the majority of the population are Protestants or Catholic (Store norske leksikon [SNL], 2017). Nicaragua is the second poorest country in Central America with an estimated 42 percent of the population living in poverty (SNL, 2017). The majority of the poor live in rural areas, where malnutrition and food insecurity are common challenges (Manchón & Macleod, 2010).

After being under the Somoza family's rule for 40 years, Nicaragua experienced a decade of civil war between 1980 and 1990 when the Sandinista government took over (Utting, Chamorro, & Bacon, 2014). Trade boycotts characterized this decade, which had massive negative effects on gross domestic product (GDP), debt, export and agriculture (Utting et al., 2014; SNL, 2017). Even though liberal politicians have governed the country since the 1990s (SNL, 2017), agriculture is still challenging in Nicaragua, especially concerning fluctuating prices of vital export products, land ownership and natural disasters (Manchón & Macleod, 2010). A way of spreading these risks is organizing in cooperatives.

Cooperatives

Cooperatives are common in Nicaragua, and as much as 80 percent of Nicaraguan small-scale³farmers are organized such in a way (Metereau, 2015). For this thesis, an agricultural

³ "Small-scale farming is a debated term, and can be defined by for example size of land or farming practices. In this paper, small-scale farming refers to a low input agro-ecosystem with little use of agrochemicals, characterized by intensive labor and the use of animals for working the land. Small-scale farmers often supply local markets and contributes to household food security, rather than a commercial international market" (Berntsen, 2016, p. 8).

cooperative is defined as “an organization in which many small farms work together as a business, especially to help each other produce and sell their crops” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2016, para. 1). Cooperatives have economic, political and social functions (Borchgrevink, 2006) and working together in a cooperative can be a great way of sharing risks and to have a safety net. It can also be a way of accessing agricultural inputs, information, credit and market connections (Ruben & Lerman, 2005). This is especially relevant in Nicaragua, as the government the recent years has given little support to cooperatives and small-scale farmers (Ruben & Lerman, 2005).

A cooperative can also be linked to non-agricultural activities. A more general definition is “a jointly owned enterprise engaging in the production or distribution of goods or the supplying of services, operated by its members for their mutual benefit, typically organized by consumers or farmers” (Dictionary, 2017, para. 5). In this thesis, I recognize the complementarity of both these definitions as it gives a more holistic understanding.

During the 1980s, the government in Nicaragua encouraged small-scale farmers and landless people to form groups and join cooperatives (Ruben & Lerman, 2005) as collective agricultural production was seen as better than individual (Borchgrevink, 2006). In the early 1980s, state-owned enterprises or cooperatives owned as much as 98 percent of all land (Ruben & Lerman, 2005). In the decade that followed, 1990s to early 2000s, a neo-liberal regime arose facilitating decollectivization, free markets and privatization. This meant less support for small-scale farmers and cooperatives (Utting et al., 2014), and ultimately even less support for rural women.

In Nicaragua, cooperatives and rural organizations are male-dominated and women’s voices are often ignored (Manchón & Macleod, 2010). While the post-revolutionary Sandinista regime significantly improved women’s access to employment and education during the 1980s, they failed to overcome the machismo culture and to give women a voice (Ellsberg, Peña, Herrera, Liljestrand, & Winkvist, 2000; Moser, 1989). There was no improvement of women’s rights, discriminatory laws, policies, violence against women or cultural norms to improve women’s situation and position (Ellsberg et al., 2000).

For rural women, organizing in cooperatives can be an arena to not only access resources, but a platform to get more political awareness and mobility. It can improve their self-confidence and quality of life and be an initiation of the empowerment process (Kabeer, 1999).

Furthermore, being organized can be a platform for creating conditions for change. Some

women have started this change through diversifying their agriculture and working with agrotourism.

Agricultural practices and agrotourism

Nicaragua has a predominant agricultural sector with 70 percent of the population engaged in agriculture (WFP, 2017). The agricultural sector represents 17 percent of GDP, and depends on crops like bananas, coffee and *granos básicos* (basic grains: corn, beans and rice) (Manchón & Macleod, 2010). Much of the agricultural production in Nicaragua is export oriented and relies on coffee, sugar, cattle, bananas and tobacco (SNL, 2017). Nicaragua has 33.500 hectares devoted to organic agriculture, making it the second largest organic production⁴ area in Central America (*Forschungseinrichtungen zur biologischen Landwirtschaft* [FiBL] and International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements [IFOAM], 2012).

In order to have products recognized as organic on a market, farmers are required to have an organic certification (IFOAM, 2003). Because this is expensive, most small-scale farmers cannot afford it as individuals. Collective certification through a cooperative, however, can be a way of affording it (IFOAM, 2003). Furthermore, if an organic certification is to be economically feasible, the farmers have to receive a premium price for the products (Ramesh et al., 2010). These prices are normally obtained in urban areas or when sold internationally, not locally (Ramesh et al., 2010).

In Nicaragua, several organizations work with small-scale farmers to share knowledge about sustainable agricultural techniques. *Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo* (ATC - Association of Rural Workers), representing approximately 50.000 Nicaraguan farmers, is one of the organizations promoting sustainable agricultural practices like agroecology⁵ (Friends of the ATC, nd). Agrotourism can be a way for farmers to combine sustainable agriculture and tourism to strengthen their livelihood economically (McGehee & Kim, 2004).

The tourism industry in Nicaragua is growing rapidly (LaVanchy, 2017) and agrotourism is relevant for any country whose economy rely on tourism and agriculture (Catalino & Lizardo,

⁴ Organic farming is explained and defined in various ways, but one common definition of organic agriculture is a system where ecosystem services such as nutrient recycling and nitrogen fixation, and long-term sustainability are considered (FAO, 2016a). Other definitions emphasize measurement of external inputs. In all cases, organic agriculture is a practice with no use of synthetic fertilizers or pesticides (FAO, 2016a).

⁵ For this thesis, agroecology is understood as a set of agricultural practices that relies on smallholders' systems and agroecosystem management (Holt-Gimez and Altieri, 2013).

2004). A study from the Dominican Republic found that a well-developed agrotourism sector would significantly increase the country's tourism income and farmers' GDP (Catalino & Lizardo, 2004). Agrotourism has the potential of being community based and is a segment of rural tourism, and can be defined as "a set of rural activities, including participating in farming activities; exploring local culture; enjoying the landscape and agro-biodiversity; observing organic and conventional agricultural practices; and sampling tropical fruits and vegetables" (Catalino & Lizardo, 2004, p. 88). Examples of agrotourism are bed and breakfast, farms stays or pick your own produce (McGehee & Kim, 2004).

Motivations for agrotourism may include socializing with guests/visitors, fully utilize resources or observed success in agrotourism for others (McGehee & Kim, 2004). Economic motivations, however, are the most common, with fluctuating or decreasing income from agriculture as a main reasons. This may change over time and there are many examples of agrotourism starting as a side income and later becoming the primary income. Even though small, the agrotourism income may be significant for the survival of the farm economy (McGehee & Kim, 2004).

Rural women

Also in Nicaragua, rural women play an invaluable role in food production, but are less likely to own the land they cultivate because cultural norms consider women as "helping out their husbands", not as food producers (Manchón & Macleod, 2010, p. 4). As a result, many women in Nicaragua have limited access to agricultural inputs, credits and markets.

Federación Nacional de Cooperativas Agropecuarias y Agroindustriales (FENACCOOP - National Federation of Farming and Agroindustrial Cooperatives) is one of the organizations that has been working to promote women's rights and participation in rural areas and to make gender⁶ issues mainstream⁷ (Manchón & Macleod, 2010). Through projects, FENACCOOP has contributed to more visible grassroots women farmers (Manchón & Macleod, 2010). Bacon (2010) found that work aimed at women's empowerment in Nicaragua has come from "women's own civil-society-based initiatives, local organizing practices, the consciousness

⁶ Whereas *sex* refers to human biology, *gender* is formed by a mix of biology and interpretation of biology. Gender roles and appropriate behavior for the two sexes are learnt from a young age, and changes over time and in every culture (Mosse, 1993). Although this thesis deals with the genders *woman* and *man*, I acknowledge that there are more than two genders.

⁷ Gender mainstreaming is the notion of gender being central to development, not marginal (Smyth, 2007).

created by the Nicaraguan women's movement and international development funding" (p. 65).

In order to achieve gender equality, men also have to support and understand the process of change (Mosse, 1993). Men have much influence on a woman's life, and having a male family member or husband working against her would undoubtedly slow down her empowerment process. Although Nicaragua is working towards gender equality, the opinion of the majority of men is that mainstreaming gender is drastic and happening too fast (Manchón & Macleod, 2010). That being said, it is important to keep in mind that not all women have positive attitudes towards gender equality either (Manchón & Macleod, 2010).

In Nicaragua, as in the rest of Latin America, the concept of machismo is a hindrance for women's empowerment (Ellsberg et al., 2000). Machismo is "emphasizing male moral, economic and social superiority over women" and maintains inequalities between men and women (Ellsberg et al., 2000, p. 1606). In addition, male aggressiveness and sexual prowess are strong values within the machismo culture and one of the reasons behind domestic violence.

According to CARE (2016a), one in three women have experienced some sort of violence at least once in their life, in most cases by an intimate partner. These numbers vary greatly by region, and a study from Nicaragua found that as much as 55 percent of women had experienced violence at least once (Ellsberg et al., 2000). Violence conducted by an intimate partner can be defined as "any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in the relationship" (WHO, 2002, p. 89).

Purpose of study

Although some women in Nicaragua are able to organize in cooperatives, many face challenges connected to gender inequality, machismo and violence that largely hinder their participation in every-day life. With two field sites in the South Western Nicaragua, this thesis looks at how women-only cooperatives contribute to the process of empowerment within a Nicaraguan context. Hopefully, this research will contribute to more knowledge about rural women's struggles, and be of information and help to governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in design of new projects and policies aimed at improving rural women's lives.

Research question and objectives

Research question:

How does organizing in cooperatives affect the empowerment process and livelihood situation for women in rural Nicaragua?

Research objectives:

Examine whether and how women's livelihoods have changed due to organization in cooperatives.

Explore how rural tourism contributes to the empowerment process for women in cooperatives.

Conceptual framework

Power

There are many ways of explaining power, and Kabeer (1999, p. 436) emphasizes power as “the ability to make choices” and not having power as being denied choice. Although the definition of power is disputed, many people associate power with something negative; a “zero sum power” that implies that if someone gets more power, another gets less (Rowlands, 1997). However, according to Rowlands (1997) power can take different forms. She divides power into *power over*, *power with*, *power to* and *power from within*.

Power over implies a “zero sum power” and is largely associated with manipulation and control over others (Rowlands, 1997). Some men’s fear of losing control and *power over* can be a hindrance for women’s empowerment. This as women gaining more power implies that it is on men’s expense and a threat (Rowlands, 1997). These power relations are the basis for the machismo culture found in Nicaragua, where many men largely control women (Ellsberg et al., 2000). However, *power with*, *to* and *from within* challenge the concept of *power over*, and does not imply a “zero sum” or domination over others (Rowlands, 1997).

Power to refers to the potential every person has to create her or his life and to make a difference. *Power from within* is each person’s uniqueness and strength, and is based in self-acceptance and self-respect. According to Rowlands (1997), these two forms constitute empowerment, and should not be considered as a threat or as potential dominance over others.

Power with is the notion of finding common ground and being stronger together (Rowlands, 1997). Organizing is an arena for creating *power with* and can be defined as “the process by which people who are individually weak and vulnerable unite and create power together”

(FAO, 2012, para. 2). This way, organizing in a cooperative can give rural women an opportunity to achieve things together, which they otherwise would not have been able to individually.

Empowerment

The word *empowerment* emerged in the 1980s from critiques of the existing gender models for development (Batliwala, 2007). The models were critiqued for only having economy as an incentive for including women, and empowerment emerged as a transformatory idea challenging patriarchy and discrimination of gender, race and ethnicity (Batliwala, 2007). This way, empowerment aims for changing women's position in developing countries⁸ (Moser, 1989).

Although empowerment emerged as a socio-political process, the word's meaning quickly became narrowed, apolitical and a pathway for neo-liberal ideas (Batliwala, 2007). What was really a *process from within* and an alternative to short-term, goal oriented projects largely became quantified (Guevara-Hernández, McCune, Rodríguez-Larramendi, & Ovando-Cruz, 2012; Smyth, 2007). The number of meetings held or the number of women elected to leadership positions became a measure of success rather than acknowledging that empowerment is a long-term process of thinking, learning and acting (Guevara-Hernández et al., 2012). Batliwala (2007) and other analysts (Smyth, 2007) argue that the once powerful word lost its power as it entered policies and programs.

Because the definition of empowerment is not protected, its use has resulted in misuse and many ambiguous definitions: it is used as a verb, a process, a noun, an approach and an activity. Furthermore, who does empowerment, and can it be done to others?

With so many different definitions, *empowerment* also has the potential for people to make it their own or choose their own definition. For this thesis, I have chosen Kabeer's (1999) definition of and framework for empowerment as it is developed in the context of rural women in developing countries. Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 435). To measure what influences making these life choices,

⁸ A developing country is for this thesis understood as a country that have "a standard of living or level of industrial production well below that possible with financial or technical aid; a country that is not yet highly industrialized" (Dictionary.com, 2017, para. 1).

Kabeer divides the ability to exercise choice into three dimensions of choice: *resources*, *agency* and *achievements*.

Resources does not only include economic and material, but also social and human. Kabeer (1999) describes resources as the pre-conditions for enhancing choice making. Someone's resources can be seen as a measure of their potential, but does not necessarily imply agency and achievements.

Where resources are the toolbox that restricts or makes things possible, *agency* is "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them" (Kabeer, 1999, p.438). To have agency can be seen as having the "power to"; it is someone's process of implementing strategic action. Agency can depend on self-esteem, awareness and education. Indicators of agency can be women's mobility in public, group participation, decision influence in household or male violence (Kabeer, 1999).

It is important to note that resources and agency alone are not a measure of empowerment, rather a measure of potential choice (Kabeer, 1999). This way, agency and resources together represent the capability and potential people have for living the lives they want (Kabeer, 1999), whereas *achievements* are the actual outcomes of their efforts. Measures of these outcomes can be frequency of domestic violence, control of income or education level (Kabeer, 1999). It is important to note, however, that not all outcomes are positive or turn out as planned. Furthermore, the three dimensions of empowerment are not meant to be seen in isolation, rather they are indivisible and must be seen with reference to each other (Kabeer, 1999).

As Kabeer's framework (1999) does not formulate *structure* or *relations* as parts of empowerment's dimensions, I also use parts of CARE's *framework for women's empowerment*. CARE's framework (2016c) for women's empowerment see the process of empowerment in the interplay of *agency*, *structure* and *relations*. Structure and relations can be seen as parts of Kabeer's preconditions that she calls resources and agency.

CARE (2016c, para. 2) defines *structure* as "the environment that surrounds her and conditions her choices". Although Kabeer (1999) does not devote much space to discuss structure, she writes that "[s]tructures shape individual resources, agency and achievements" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 461). Structure is therefore understood as an underlying condition for empowerment also in her framework. Indicators of structural restrictions for women can be a lack of access to information and services, little or no political representation or gender

discriminatory laws (CARE, 2016c). The machismo culture in Nicaragua is another example of structures that largely hinder a woman's empowerment process. Moser (1989) argues that empowerment is a long-term strategy to challenge and break down structures that hold up gender inequality for women to gain new positions in society.

Relations is defined as “the power relations through which she negotiates her path” (CARE, 2016c, para. 2). To understand these power relations, it can be helpful to examine changes in mobility, acceptance of accountability and relationships and social relations (CARE, 2016c). A change in occurrence of intimate partner violence can be an indicator of agency.

Several authors have pointed out how cooperatives can contribute to the empowerment process (Bacon, 2010; Kroeker, 1995; Rowlands, 1997). As this thesis looks at empowerment through cooperatives, McWhirter's (1991) definition is a helpful addition to Kabeer's to understand empowerment and power dynamics for a whole group. She defines it as “[t]he process by which people, organizations, or groups who are powerless (a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context, (b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives, (c) exercise this control without infringing up on the rights of others, and (d) support the empowerment of others in their community” (McWhirter's, 1991, p. 224). Other authors (Moser, 1989; Rowlands, 1997) also emphasize empowerment as a contributor to gaining more power, but not on other's expense.

Triple role of women

In rural communities, men and women tend to have significantly different roles (De Schutter, 2013; Moser, 1989; Mosse, 1993). Women's roles are often to be informal and not considered “real work”, whereas men's roles are recognized by payment or political power (Moser, 1989). Gender division of labor imply a ranking of status many places, and women's roles restrict them from doing work outside the household (Mosse, 1993). For women in most rural communities, their workload falls within three roles commonly called *the triple role of women*. These are *the productive role*, *the reproductive role* and *the community management role* (Moser, 1989).

The *productive role* is women's responsibility for food production, especially growing food for consumption (Moser, 1989). Men more often have the responsibility for cash crops, and are in this way connected to the formal economy (De Schutter, 2013). A substantial proportion of rural women in Nicaragua work in the production sector, but as Nicaraguan women are seen as housewives rather than farmers, their work are often less valued than that

of men (Manchón & Macleod, 2010). Because of this sexual division of labor, women's productive work is often invisible and statistically unrecorded (Moser, 1989). In Nicaragua, as many places, there are no official statistics on women's agricultural contributions (Manchón & Macleod, 2010).

Women's *reproductive role* is seen as a natural responsibility in women's life and is therefore not recognized as work (Moser, 1989; Mosse, 1993). This role includes tasks like child bearing, caring for children and family members and domestic work. This is also true in Nicaragua, as caring for the family and household work is considered Nicaraguan women's primary work (Manchón & Macleod, 2010).

The third role is *community management* and is seen as an extension of the reproductive role (Moser, 1989). This role is a result of an inadequate public sector, poor housing facilities and sanitation, and a lack of health services. Women are often the ones taking the responsibility for distributing the little resources there is to ensure survival of their families (Moser, 1989). While women have this management role, men's roles within the community tend to be of leadership and formal roles within politics.

Because women are tied to their homes and are situated lower in the hierarchy than men, they are more vulnerable. It is largely agreed upon that women suffer greater in cases of natural disasters or climate change (Nelson, Meadows, Cannon, Morton, & Martin, 2010). All their duties can make it hard to find or return to waged work and therefore increase both their vulnerability and workload. For example, after hurricane Mitch hit Nicaragua and neighboring countries in 1998, poor women were hit especially hard (Nelson et al., 2010). This is still relevant, as Nicaragua is hit regularly by droughts, which has become more severe in the recent years due to climate change (Segnestam, 2009).

When women's triple role is not recognized by neither men in the community, policy makers or NGOs, their roles become a burden (Moser, 1989). It is especially important to recognize women's already high workload when designing projects targeting women, in order not to give women an additional workload. Women's roles are complex and nuanced, and talking to rural women is vital for understanding and getting insight in their lives (Mosse, 1993). This is what I did to gain a better understanding of rural women's situation.

Methodology

This thesis is based on qualitative primary data collected in Nicaragua over a period of seven weeks during the summer of 2016. The main method was in-depth interviews, all conducted with a young Nicaraguan woman as an interpreter. My fieldwork is based in two different rural communities, staying approximately a week in each site.

Introduction to study area

Both field sites are poor rural communities with women-only cooperatives, established approximately ten years ago. I stayed with a cooperative member and her family in both places, in facilities used for hosting tourists and visitors within a rural tourism concept, paying US\$10 a night. Both cooperatives work or have worked closely with one or more NGOs to access funding or projects. Though the NGOs, the cooperatives had access to a variety of trainings, workshops and other activities.

Lugar del Lago

Lugar del Lago (fictive name) is situated on the volcanic island Ometepe in Lake Nicaragua. Ometepe is increasingly becoming a tourist destination, and is known for its low impact eco-tourism (Ometepe Nicaragua, 2017). The field site Lugar del Lago is located approximately an hour away from the main tourist hub where the ferry from the mainland comes in. The island has poor infrastructure, and the road from the ferry to Lugar del Lago is not paved.

The women's cooperative here, *La Cooperativa Mujeres del Volcán* (hereafter called *Mujeres del Volcán*), has been working closely with a local NGO⁹ on a community based rural tourism project, and they have received trainings and upgraded their housing facilities to better suit tourists. At the time of my fieldwork, the local NGO was in the process of letting go of the rural tourism project, in order for the cooperative to be independent.

The cooperative works towards being formally legalized in terms of documentation, but has not yet had the money to do so. Although, they are officially a group, not yet legalized as a cooperative, I choose to refer to them as a cooperative throughout this thesis. I found this field site through contacts I got during the first weeks in Nicaragua and I spent seven days here, living with a cooperative member and her husband for five.

⁹ This NGO is referred to as *the local NGO* throughout the text for simplicity and anonymization reasons.

The cooperative Mujeres del Volcán was initiated in 2007 by two local women and consists of approximately eight active members in their 40s to 60s and one 27 years old woman, most of whom are farmers. One of the cooperative's projects is creating a market place to sell their produce. The women have received trainings on organic agriculture and are producing most of their food organically, although they do not have an organic certification. Plantain is one of the main crops cultivated on the island and farmers have little access to new agricultural technology such as fertilizers (Schreiner et al., 2010). This makes the production quite low compared to regions with similar conditions.

Campo Fresco

La Cooperativa las Mujeres Chispas (hereafter called Mujeres Chispas), is located in Campo Fresco (fictive name), a rural community in the municipality of El Crucero. The community is situated in the highlands, approximately an hour's drive from the capital Managua. Although Campo Fresco also has two seasons, they experience a more even distribution of rain throughout the year than in the lowlands.

Mujeres Chispas was formed in 2006, formally legalized in 2009 and has 22 members. Their agriculture is not certified organic, but they referred to their production as organic, and sold it to visitors as organic at a premium price. Campo Fresco is on the Somoza family's old land, and they have worked hard as a community to get land rights after the Somoza time, especially for the women. The cooperative relies on coffee and vegetable production, community based rural tourism and sales of handcrafts. They have also played a crucial role in development of the community by bringing in for example electricity, an elementary school and new houses for the poorest families.

I decided to include the Campo Fresco site as I met one of the founders of the cooperative during the delegation *Agroecology and Food Sovereignty in Nicaragua*, a few weeks before I conducted the fieldwork. Several people told me that this was a strong well-functioning grass root initiated women's cooperative. My entry point was spending eight days living with the family of one of the elite members¹⁰.

Data collection and analysis

For my data collection, I used snowball and purposive sampling. I first contacted a small group of people who were relevant for the research topic, and through these established

¹⁰ The elite is five of the members with central leadership positions. Of my key informants this includes Mercedes, Scarleth, Esther and Karen.

contact with others. I had to ensure variety and find informants that I knew were relevant for my research question. Therefore, I used purposive sampling, a strategic method where informants are handpicked for their unique perspectives and understandings (Bryman, 2008). I decided before I started that I wanted the views of people from different hierarchical levels from within the cooperative as well as key people connected to the cooperative and outsiders. For example, if I felt they told me a one-sided story I would use purposive sampling in order to seek a more nuanced understanding.

Methods

I collected a major part of my data through interviews, based on a semi-structured interview guide. As I do not speak Spanish, I used an interpreter to assist me when conducting interviews. My interpreter was a young native Nicaraguan woman, who had little personal interest in or previous knowledge about my thesis topic. I see these two things as strengths for her as my interpreter. Because of limited funding, my interpreter was not a professional and had limited experience. In order for me to make sure I understood everything that was being said, all interviews were recorded and transcribed.

I conducted 27 interviews in Lugar del Lago and Campo Fresco, with informants between 25 and 70 years old (see table 1 and 2). The majority of interviewees being women in their 30s to 50s. In addition to the interviews conducted here, I carried out 15 interviews in Somotillo, two in the capital Managua, one in Matagalpa and one close to La Paz Centro, all of which gave me insight and will provide context information for the two cases.

Table 1: The table shows the number of interviews conducted in Lugar del Lago on the left side, and the key informants¹¹ on the right. I conducted 15 interviews in Lugar del Lago.

Lugar del Lago	
<i>Interviews</i>	<i>Key informants</i>
6 members	Yulissa, Karen, Maria
3 previous members	(none)
3 non-members	(none)
2 husbands of members	(none)
1 employee at the local NGO	The employee

Table 2: The table shows the number of interviews conducted in in Campo Fresco on the left side, and the key informants on the right. I conducted 12 interviews in Campo Fresco.

Campo Fresco	
<i>Interviews</i>	<i>Key informants</i>
5 elite members	Mercedes, Scarleth, Esther, Rosa
2 non-elite member	The non-elite member
3 non-members	Brenda
2 husbands of members	(none)

¹¹ Key informants are the interviewees I have put especially emphasis on in the results and discussion. This does not mean that other interviews were not used, but they are not as predominant.

Prior to my fieldwork, I spent ten days on a *Food Sovereignty & Agroecology in Nicaragua* delegation arranged by Friends of the ATC. During the delegation's travel, I was introduced to the historical, political and agricultural context of Nicaragua and this helped as background knowledge during my fieldwork. It also gave me contacts that led me to my data collection sites.

During my time in Nicaragua, I made sure to triangulate using different methods to crosscheck my findings (Bryman, 2008). For example, by living with cooperative members and their families I could participate in their lives and observe them during the time I spent there. Keeping in mind that I was only there for a limited time, this triangulation contributed to forming my understanding and conclusions of this thesis.

Because I did not want to exhaust my interpreter as she lived with me and translated for me whenever I needed, she also spent time talking to relevant people without translating. Parts of my general understanding therefore comes from conversations she had and then told me afterwards.

Analysis

After transcribing my interviews, I was left with a 130-page transcript. In order to transform my transcript into useful text that could inform my thesis, I analyzed and divided it based on themes. Each theme got its own color in order for me to easier sort it out. In addition, I drew *rich pictures*, a method where drawing is used to visually understand a complex situation, to analyze the data.

I have emphasized the data I considered reliable, for example where I could triangulate, and developed my results and discussion based on this. During the writing process, I revisited my interview transcript and included new material that I did not understand earlier or that I thought was insignificant. Furthermore, time for reflection has been central for my understanding of data and experiences.

Ethics

An important way of protecting the interviewees' privacy is anonymization (Bryman, 2008). I have changed all names of communities, cooperatives and persons to pseudonyms and in some cases, changed family relations, positions in community or age. I always made sure the interviewees knew they would be anonymous, and that the interpreter knew it.

I always informed the interviewee about why I was there and why I wanted to talk to them prior to the interviews. Some of the interviews were conducted at times when I was not prepared, however, or in rather messy situations. At these times, I could have been more explicit about my role as a researcher or what I wanted from the interviewees. In some cases I experienced interviewees being confused, even if I had explained my role. In addition, because I found most of the interviewees through walking from door to door, many of the interviewees were not prepared and could potentially have felt rushed into an interview. My impression was that I still got the information that I needed and a good picture of the situation.

Limitations and challenges

I was unfamiliar with the language and culture in Nicaragua, which has affected the data collection and probably also the analysis of my data. However, being unfamiliar with the culture is not necessarily negative; it can also mean that I saw things with new eyes that people living in the area have stopped noticing (Bryman, 2008).

Furthermore, only spending seven and eight days on each field site have not given me the opportunity to get to know people and the areas in depth. This might have affected people's openness to me; some have been reserved, while for others, talking to a stranger might have been a safe space to open up without commitments (Bryman, 2008).

In the beginning of my fieldwork, my interpreter had troubles interrupting the interviewees to give me a translation. She would therefore let them talk for several minutes before I got a summary. As we practiced, however, we developed better ways of conducting interviews together. For instance, towards the end of the fieldwork, we managed to create an interview dynamic where she gave me translations after every sentence with very little interruption in the interview. This way I could follow the interviewee's facial expressions and it allowed me to be more present in the interviews. I could have direct contact with the interviewees, follow everything that was being said and ask better follow-ups.

Lastly, having conversations with people through an interpreter might have made people more tense and the situation more formal than I wanted it to be. Furthermore, during some interviews, uninvited people like curious neighbors or husbands would listen to or participate in the interview. Depending on how the interviewee reacted, I could for example feel compelled to ask less sensitive questions.

Results and discussion

Projects in Lugar del Lago

In this section, I present the results from the Ometepe field site, Lugar del Lago, and discuss these within two major topics: *the little market* and *the rural tourism project*. I chose these two topics as most themes I encountered fell into either of these two. The main themes in the first project is a lack of economic resources and motivation, with the example of a little market place that women in the cooperative want to build. The second major theme is a rural tourism project proposed by the local NGO. This section explores the many challenges the women faced while adopting this project.

Results

The little market

Members of *Cooperativa Mujeres del Volcán* (hereafter called *Mujeres del Volcán*) told me that it has become increasingly dry in Lugar del Lago during the last years, and that they often experience periods of drought also in the wet season. As a response to three years in a row with drought, and a following low food production, a local NGO had a brainstorming meeting with the members of *Mujeres del Volcán* to look for new initiatives to strengthen the cooperative and their economy.

The cooperative members themselves came up with the idea of a *little market* (*ranchito*), where they could sell vegetables, processed foods like jam, bread and cakes and handcrafts made by the members. They also envisioned the market to be a place for tourists to buy food and drinks, and to get information about their lodging.

The members wanted the food to be produced by themselves and saw a need to change to a more diversified cropping system. Up until then, the women had grown mostly basic grains and plantains, which increased drought vulnerability and represented one-sidedness not only in the diet, but also in terms of the agroecosystem. With support from the local NGO, the women received trainings on how to produce food organically with homemade fertilizer and diversifying their agriculture with more fruit trees and vegetables.

Yulissa (52), my host and one of the farmers in the cooperative, said her own production now sustains her husband and herself with enough money to cover their basic needs, which it did not before. The transition to a more diverse crop production allowed her and several of the

other women to have a more balanced diet, higher income, food production for a longer period of the year and a basis for selling a diversity of products in the little market.

The members decided that the cooperative's youngest member, Maria (27), would take care of the little market on a daily basis. She is a single mother without a place on her own, and this would be an opportunity for her to get an income and eventually buy her own house. Maria worked in the little market on occasions already, but not as often as they all would like. The reason for this is that the market building was unfinished.

When I was in Lugar del Lago, the little market was an open structure with little more than a roof. They had chairs, tables and some materials ready, but did not have the money to finish the building. One of the cooperative members said this affects her motivation:

“And for now, we're stuck. And sometimes we don't even have an income to make these flyers and let people know what to do. And it's a struggle because sometimes you can't really see where your money is going. You don't get your investment back.”

The members had worked for more than a year building the market, and had experienced several difficulties: the market was situated in a place that turned into a river when raining, and under a mango tree which had destroyed the roof with falling fruit. A couple of the women told me they experienced this as a derision from the local government as they assigned the location. Karen (43), farmer and a cooperative member, said she felt like they are not taken seriously in the community, not as a cooperative and not with the little market:

“They mock us. They think it's crazy. Beginning with the husbands. Even some authorities. Some women. They've made obstacles for us. Personally it affects me.”

A couple of the women told us that they as a cooperative wanted to produce mango jam. Mango trees were abundant in the area where the cooperative members lived, and walking along the roads, one literally walked in old mango seeds. However, Yulissa told me that they did not have the money to buy the equipment like jars and stickers for storing and selling jam (see figure 2 for all the cooperative's hindrances and wishes for the future). Karen also talked about the mangoes: *“But regarding the fruit, we still haven't managed how to take advantage of it. I know we could have taken advantage of the last mango harvest, but we didn't.”*

Even though they are struggling, Maria looks brightly at the future:

“I thought about leaving the cooperative because I didn’t see any change here. Instead of going forward, we’re going backwards (...) When I decided to leave, this little market wasn’t here. When they started with this, it gave me hope. But I see my future really good. Maybe the next time you come, I’m selling products here. If you don’t have any goals, there is no way you can improve yourself.”



Figure 2: This rich picture visualizes the cooperative members’ wishes for the little market on the right side, and what is hindering them on the left side. On the upper left side, organizations and projects are unavailable, tourists are out of reach in the main tourist hub and a man is representing the machismo culture. On the left side of the center, the river is running through the market, mangoes are destroying the roof and piling up to rot. On the top right side there are tourists hiking down the volcano, on their way to the little market to leave money for the cooperative. A cooperative member is selling products there, mangoes are processed into jam and they provide information about their lodging. In the bottom right corner, a tourist is staying with one of the women in the cooperative, being served fresh products from the garden (Illustration by Caroline Berntsen).

Eight months after conducting fieldwork, I called Yulissa to get an update on how things were working out for them. She said they were stuck because of a lack of money and the other women’s motivation, and that Maria did not seem to be motivated to work on the little market as they had agreed on. Eight months earlier Yulissa said one of the cooperative’s challenges is that they are not equal in terms of livelihood situation, for example Maria is a single mom without a place of her own and the other women have their own houses and gardens.

Furthermore, they had experienced some formal difficulties which made her think that they would not get legalized as a cooperative. She sees this as a problem for them, as NGOs ask for documentation to verify that they are a cooperative when they apply for projects.

The rural tourism project

The local NGO started a rural tourism project for women farmers and male farmers' wives to have an extra income. Mujeres del Volcán was asked by the local NGO to join the project, as one of several cooperatives on the island. Initially, 25 women were interested in joining the project from Lugar del Lago, 17 joined and five remained active in the cooperative with their hosting facilities. The local NGO provided the members with basic hosting facilities depending on the individual members' needs. Examples of facilities asked for are a bathroom with a water toilet, an extra room, a bed and a fan. In addition, the local NGO gave the women in the project group trainings on topics like food hygiene, cooking and cultural differences in order for them to be better prepared for hosting. They targeted both Nicaraguan and international tourists although no basic English trainings were given.

My host, Yulissa, is one of the women offering a room to tourists. She and her husband had a lockable room with two beds, a fan and mosquito nets on a dirt floor, and a bathroom with a water toilet. The outdoor kitchen has a roof covering the ground, a fireplace and two kitchen tops on each side. They have electricity in the house and in the outdoor kitchen. They collect water needed for the kitchen from the electric pump well just a few meters from the house. This had also been donated by the local NGO. They have no refrigerator, which means food is freshly harvested or bought the same day. I had three meals a day included in my stay, and Yulissa seemed proud to be able to serve me different dishes and drinks from her own produce for every meal. She also took us around the farm and the neighborhood, and said she wanted her home to be a base for tourists to explore the island on their own. Yulissa explains how they got involved with the rural tourism project:

“Well, they came here. We had a meeting, they were visiting every house of the cooperative. And they asked us if we wanted to work with rural tourism. We asked ‘How are we going to work with that?’ And they were like, ‘I can see you have a house where you can offer a little dorm. Maybe in the future, you can have a bathroom. Because you might have visitors that don’t like latrines.’ We didn’t know anything about rural tourism. And suddenly they came up with the idea, and we liked it. We got nice stuff, and they told us that we could get

income with that. We could help our families with that. Going forward. Even put our kids in school.”

In order to become hosts, the local NGO had certain requirements. Another cooperative member explains what she thinks about building water toilets.

“We were told it was necessary to have a water toilet for the guests. But there are actually foreigners who like latrines. Good looking and settled latrines. And some of these foreigners actually like it, because they feel like they want to change their lifestyle here. We have good latrines.”

Despite having hosting facilities similar to Yulissa’s, all of the members I talked to said they would like to host more people, and that they did not have enough visitors. They said they had posters hanging in the main tourist hub on the island and that the local NGO has the cooperative’s contact information on their webpage. Others mentioned that previous visitors would spread the word about them and that new people would come that way. Making flyers was also mentioned as a way to reach out to visitors, but lack of money to print constrained them.

To gain a different perspective, I went to a British resort owner to talk about what she saw as the obstacles for women starting with rural tourism in the area. Her experience from the island was that many of the people initiating such projects lacked business skills and knowledge. As examples, she mentioned not knowing what the customers want, not being clean enough, inconsistency (one day they are there, the other day not) and not using their resources and prioritizing. For example having access to internet, but not taking advantage of it. She further said that internet is today’s most important way of getting visitors and that she gets all her visitors through websites.

The women in the cooperative also mentioned internet as a way to reach out to tourists, emphasizing Facebook and a web page. The local NGO had donated a computer to the cooperative, which did not work at the time I was there, and a camera to get the Facebook and web page up and running. Yulissa said the older women did not know how to handle a computer: *“We were donated a computer actually. But we couldn’t use it”*. They therefore gave the responsibility for the social media to the cooperative’s youngest member, Maria. She had been to a social media seminar arranged by the local NGO, but the cooperative did not use the Facebook page they made at this seminar. Although the computer did not work, Maria and the other members said they had other ways of accessing the internet and Facebook.

When asked why she had not activated the Facebook page, Maria first said she just had not thought about it. Secondly, that she did not have her own lodge and when she would go to take pictures of the other women's houses, maybe they would not have it tidy. To understand the situation, I asked further about the topic, and in the end, she seemed embarrassed not to have "fixed" the Facebook page. I also went to talk to the cooperative's contact person in the local NGO, to find out more about the Facebook situation:

"I think that they're not interested in it. They're older people. They don't think that communication is important. And secondly, the internet access in Lugar del Lago is not really good. Even cell phone network. But still, that's not an obstacle. They could go to a cyber café at least once a week. And like I said, it's more like a lack of interest."

She further talks about the Mujeres del Volcán's foundation for becoming independent from them:

I think they [the cooperative] are beginning their steps. 8 months ago we left them by themselves. So I think they're on their first steps to independence. Besides giving them empowerment¹², we've also given them their own media for communication. For example they have their Facebook page. We have them on our website. We gave them equipment so they could be stronger

When I called Yulissa eight months after my fieldwork, she told me that there are not many tourists coming, even though many come to the island. She further said that they still were not using any social media tools for marketing. The few paying guests they have had the last eight months found their way through friends.

¹² The employee at the local NGO explains what they mean with empowerment: *"We work with the person regarding their body, they're feelings, their rights. And that they feel like they are the same as a man. Empowerment has to do with the economy, it's not just having incomes. It's so that she can have the decisions to administer her own money (...) So for us, that's what empowerment is. Having knowledge and putting that knowledge into practice"*.

Discussion

The responsibility of an NGO

Mujeres del Volcán attracts visitors through contacts, previous guests and the local NGO. All of the women I interviewed wanted more visitors to come, but seemed powerless in their attempts to attract them. My first impression was that the women were not taking enough responsibility for marketing, and relied too much on others. Although the local NGO gave them the information, methods and equipment they needed to create a social media platform to reach out to visitors from, it seemed hard for them to get in contact with customers or even knowing how to do so. Also, they may not have an understanding of the value of social media marketing.

However, as the local NGO initiated the tourism project, it is their responsibility that the women have the required business skills to run a tourism cooperative independently. With just a few trainings and seminars the women are in no position to run a tourist cooperative in all its complexity. Did the local NGO have unrealistic goals for the women and the project? They expect the cooperative to manage complex things they have little or no prerequisites or skills for. They also seem to think that social media is the best way for the women to attract visitors. However, all the members except Maria are women in their 40s to 60s, out of touch with new technology.

In addition, it is crucial to recognize the triple role of women when designing a project for women. This, in order to make sure they are not given an additional work burden (Moser, 1989). A member of the cooperative said that housework and food production took all of her time and that it was hard to find time to manage a Facebook page, take pictures for the webpage and flyers and to be active in the cooperative. Time as a constrain was also mentioned by a couple of other members, which can indicate that the local NGO did not take all of the women's roles into account when designing the rural tourism project, rather giving them more work.

Despite what the women in the cooperative told me and what the local NGO writes on their website, Mujeres del Volcán's contact person at the local NGO does not take responsibility for initiating their rural tourism project:

“It's not like we're going to the community and say 'do you want to be in a tourism cooperative'. No, it's something that starts from the women, it's their idea. They were independent women who worked in agriculture, but at the

same time, they were working with us, defending human rights¹³. And after that, the tourism idea was formed by them (...) it's an addition to daily activities. If they are farmers, they have to work on their land and connect it to the rural tourism."

Ownership to the projects

At the time of visit, Mujeres del Volcán was in the process of becoming independent from the local NGO. As I got familiar with the process, I began to ask myself who had ownership for this project. As discussed earlier, the initial idea belonged to the local NGO, and was then later adopted by Mujeres del Volcán. One of the cooperative members explains how they all were required to install a water toilet, even though she thinks tourists would like her clean latrine. This example shows how the local NGO sat the terms and conditions for the project. Mujeres del Volcán could to a very little extent influence the project from the beginning, and was not able to exercise agency.

Starting a tourist cooperative is not necessarily something the women in Mujeres del Volcán would have done if they did not get the idea and project from the local NGO. It is hard to have agency as they are jumping into an unfamiliar medium of tourism, marketing and business management with limited prerequisite skills, and as the project is already defined by someone else. This lack of agency and ownership, as well as limited resources and knowledge are spinning into the women's motivation and achievements. As a result of this, several of the initial members that were given *tourist equipment* left the cooperative and the project at an early stage. This resembles Zapata's (2011) theories on short life expectancy of an adopted project.

What are the other women's roles in these projects? Even though the little market was the cooperative's own idea, can it be that only a few members make decisions, and that the rest lack ownership to the ideas they developed? One previous member told me that she wanted to be a part of the cooperative's meetings and planning processes, but felt systematically excluded, and was therefore not an active member anymore. In Maria's case, she had dreams and went to trainings and was supported by the older women, but was still not working with the projects as they agreed on. Kroeker (1995) found that lack of ownership in cooperatives

¹³ Yulissa has been working with the local NGO for many years and participated on workshops and trainings on topics like women's rights and empowerment.

could become problematic if the development of ideas did not come from the cooperative members themselves.

Even though unintended, there seems to be some sort of power play within the cooperative that results in unequal distribution of power and decision-making. Although power issues occurs in most relationships, it is important for an NGO to consider these power structures when entering a community, in order not to cause additional harm. In Mujeres del Volcán's case, the local NGO seems to only have considered *power with* and *to*, not *power over*, leaving the cooperative with few tools to deal with power structures that inhibits the cooperative's development.

Empowering projects?

As a result of few achievements, Karen says she feels like the local government and the community has no respect for them, and it affects her and the other women's self-feeling and motivation. Agency have to be present even in times of opposition from others (Kabeer, 1999), and all sorts of resistance seem to be hindering Mujeres del Volcán from achieving their goals. Although they know what they want, it is hard for them to have agency and they seem powerless to move forward. That they are not able to legalize the cooperative, is an additional hindrance for them because they were legalized, it would be easier for them to access projects and get support from organizations.

Yulissa and some of the other women talked about creating flyers for reaching out to visitors. Putting out these flyers in the main tourist hub might be a good way of attracting visitors and a method more within the women's means than social media marketing. However, the lack of money to make them was a prominent hindering force for actual achievements. The constant drawbacks the women experience is clearly affecting their motivation to move forward. Also, not being able to finish the little market affects the members' motivation and seem to work as a positive feedback: the less they achieve, the less motivated they are to finish it. Kabeer (1999) emphasizes that a cooperative can be a part of the resource base in the empowerment process. In this case, the cooperative as a whole seem to be stuck in a negative track and is not being a resource for the women to move on.

An employee at the local NGO argued that they as an NGO had given the women in the cooperative empowerment. However, understanding empowerment as the ability to make strategic life choices, implies that empowerment cannot be given to others, rather people have to empower themselves to be actors in their own lives (Kabeer, 1999). The local NGO gave

the women materials, technological inputs and trainings, not empowerment. One should also keep in mind that even though the local NGO gave them skills and knowledge, “[t]eaching does not mean that learning takes place” (Cousins, 1998, p. 58).

In Yulissa’s case, the empowerment process was initiated not necessarily as a result of her being a cooperative member, but because of her agency to change and her work with the local NGO. Yulissa is one of the driving forces for many of the cooperative’s initiatives, the cooperative has been an arena for her to build skills and capacities. She has brought her agency back to the community, initiated a cooperative and tried helping other women on the way. Although not all cooperative members are empowered, the cooperative may be an arena to develop further and for them to make achievements further on.

Still some outcomes

The women in Mujeres del Volcán have put a lot of work also into the rural tourism project and the little market, but have not obtained the achievements or results they would have liked to see. Are they, with the help of the local NGO, wasting their resources or is it good learning? An NGO is supposed to be a resource that the cooperative does not have. Is the local NGO being a resource, or are they disempowering the women by putting them in a situation they cannot handle? Yulissa sums up how she experiences being a part of the rural tourism project:

“I don’t see it really bad or really good, it’s something in between. Even though we can’t say we’ve been doing really good, we still have had some accomplishments. Accomplishments we’ve never had before. We’ve gotten new knowledge, in the trainings... I think that’s an accomplishment, because we didn’t know that before. Another accomplishment is socializing, because, for example, how would I get to know Carol and you [my interpreter and I] if it wasn’t for this? So that’s an accomplishment.”

Despite little success with the rural tourism project, the involvement with the local NGO has given the women some opportunities and new knowledge. All cooperative members had attended at least some workshops or trainings on topics like women’s rights, empowerment, environmental issues and sustainable agriculture.

Several of the women have changed their agricultural practices and said that this has benefitted their economy and given them a basis for agrotourism. In the Dominican Republic, Catalino and Lizardo (2004) found that agro-tourism would benefit conventional tourism and

improve sustainable agricultural practices, as 60 percent of the agrotourists expressed that they were interested in learning about organic agriculture rather than conventional. In this way, agrotourism can be an incentive for farmers to practice organic or sustainable agriculture, as it has been for Mujeres del Volcán.

However, community based tourism has been criticized for having a low positive impact on the local economy and a low life expectancy after projects end. Lack of business skills to manage tourists is often seen as a weakness for creating a resilient community based tourism (Zapata, 2011), and this was also pointed out by the British resort owner. Iakovidou and Turner (1995) found that for agrotourism in Greece to be viable, a genuine wish to please guests and hospitality is not enough; you must also have a high material standard and be professional. Mujeres del Volcán seems to lack the resources, skills and knowledge to run a tourist cooperative successfully and as a result also motivation.

Zapata (2011) found that local initiation had better effects on the local community, and longer life expectancy than top down initiated projects. In the next section, examples from Campo Fresco illustrates how a grass roots initiated rural tourism cooperative differs from the one in Lugar del Lago. In Campo Fresco they have a hardworking and charismatic leader who is an inspiration for agency. Even though there are little resources there too, the Campo Fresco cooperative has plenty of achievements, and not only in regards to rural tourism.

Projects in Campo Fresco

La Cooperativa las Mujeres Chispas (hereafter called Las Chispas) had so much going on that it was hard to separate into a few major projects or topics as I did in Lugar del Lago. They have projects such as rural tourism, collaborations with organizations and produced coffee and vegetables and everything here is deeply interconnected.

Results

Introducing Las Chispas

In Campo Fresco, we stayed with one of the cooperative's elite members, Mercedes (49), and her family. The house we stayed in belongs to Mercedes's daughter Jennifer (26), and is a small elevated wooden house, with two beds, four windows and a beautiful view down a forest valley. The shower facilities consists of four plastic covered walls with a bucket of water at the dirt floor, just outside our house. The toilet is a clean latrine, just a few meter down the hill with the same beautiful view. They collected water from rainwater, and in addition the local government provided it from tanks once a week.

Jennifer has no kitchen facilities, so we consumed all meals in Mercedes's house, 50 meters away. I had three meals a day included in my stay here, but in contrast to that in Lugar del Lago, the food was less varied and consisted largely of rice, red beans and corn, as no fruit or vegetables were in season. Las Chispas worked to introduce rural tourism to the community, and when staying with Mercedes and her daughter, I was able to try out these same facilities they offer visitors. Typical activities they offer their visitors are guided trips in the community, participation in daily life routines, such as food preparation, and agricultural activities. In the delegation I participated in, one working group stayed with this cooperative for 5 days; a couple of people in Jennifer's house, the rest with other elite members.

Mercedes is one of the initiators of the cooperative and also one of the driving forces of its progress. She has a troubled background and started working with women's rights in the 70s. Several people said the community and cooperative in Campo Fresco would be "nothing" without Mercedes. She is bringing in groups of visitors, tourists, NGOs and projects to the community. Mercedes and the cooperative's achievements since the cooperative's initiation ten years ago are found in table 3.

Table 3: The table shows Las Chispas' achievements (*benefits*, as the community members called them) divided into community benefits and member benefits.

Community benefits	Member benefits
Electricity in the community	Computers, tools, water harvesting structures
Improved roads	Crops donations as coffee plants, yucca, vegetables and fruit trees
Primary school (before, the children had to travel several km)	Transformed agricultural practices to organic and agroecology
New houses for the poorest families	Trainings and workshops on topics like agroecology, organic farming, coffee growing, women's rights, empowerment and more
Food aid in times of crises	Opportunities to travel and go to new places

New latrines	New sources of income through sale of processed coffee, coffee candles, homemade jewelry
	Income from hosting groups of visitors and tourists

Although they want to, the cooperative does not have an organic certification. The reason is high costs for the certified labelling. Mercedes told me this results in loss of opportunity to sell their coffee at a premium price internationally. However, through trainings and workshops they have learned how to produce their coffee organically and with agroecological practices. They had a technician from the university in Managua come and take samples of their soil and coffee, and he did not find any traces of pesticides. They therefore know what their coffee is worth and sell it at a premium price (US\$7 a pound for ground coffee) to visitors regardless of not having an organic certification. Through the sale of this coffee, many of the cooperative members have gotten an income, which they did not have previously.

In addition to the coffee, the women are selling coffee candles (ordinary candles with coffee beans glued on the side) and homemade jewelry. Jennifer is one of the women making and selling jewelry and while staying there, my interpreter and I helped her make some. At the end of the session, she said we could buy the products we had made, which we did. This was something they often did with visitors, and one way of getting an income.

Individual change

Some among the elite told me that they had changed their agricultural practices to agroecology. For them, this meant making organic fertilizer, planting more plants on less space and various other agricultural practices to better utilize and take care of their land. Earlier they mostly had corn and beans, while now they grow vegetables, fruit trees, yucca and coffee too. In addition to selling processed coffee to visitors and organizations, they sell fruits, vegetables and eggs at local markets. None of the members, except Mercedes, had any income before getting involved in the cooperative, and now they all have an income from coffee, tourists and various other activities. Esther (47), one of the elite members, says she can contribute to her household's expenses now, which she could not do before becoming a member of the cooperative.

Esther says many things have changed in her life and she is now a community coordinator for the ATC and calls herself a politician. Today, she says she dares to stand up and speak and feels that people listen to and respect her: *“I’m not scared anymore. I’m the one who rule in my home, making the decisions. And giving women in the cooperative advice as well. About not letting themselves be abused.”*

The cooperative members Rosa (55) and Scarleth (29) said they used to be shy before, and that they are more self-confident now. Rosa said that doing an interview now feels better than it did before, and even though she is still a little shy, she seemed comfortable. She also said that before becoming a part of the cooperative, she only stayed at home: *“For example, before when I was not organized. I didn’t go anywhere. But now that we are organized, we receive trainings, meetings. We’re not stuck here in our houses.”*

Scarleth was particularly shy speaking in public, but she goes to meetings, trainings and even teaches others now. She has taught Esther and other older women (in their 40s to 60s) in the cooperative how to read and write, and she seemed proud about it. Scarleth is a single mom by choice, and lives together with her two young children and her mom who helps her out on an everyday basis. At the time, she was working part time as a teacher for adults in the community, teaching them to read and write. She had taught several of the women in the cooperative to read and write, and loved being able to help other people improve themselves. Scarleth’s goal in life is to be a teacher in the primary school in her local community.

Individual change for some

The elite emphasized that all benefits achieved by the cooperative are for all the members. Although there have been collective benefits for the community, not everyone seem to agree that there are equal benefits for all. The following highlights how the elite seem to be more benefitted, how they try to hold up “a perfect picture” and how some feel like they are more on display than members.

For the first two days, Jennifer took me around to talk to members of the cooperative. After conducting a few interviews, I realized that most of the interviewees had an over exaggerated positive view of about the cooperative¹⁴. Furthermore, this selected group seemed used to having visitors and said they did interviews on a regular basis. When walking off on my own I

¹⁴ In particular, one of the elite members had exclusively positive things to say about everything. As I found this as unreliable, her statements is not at all included in the thesis.

encountered a member who had never done an interview. Although she acknowledged the work of the cooperative, she was not satisfied with being a member:

“What I want is to feel included or being taken into account (...) Sometimes we have people coming, important people. And when they want them to see how big the group is, they invite us (...) I bet they told you wonderful things about the cooperative, hah! If they’d taken me into account, I would say nice things too.”

A non-member talk about memberships and power in the cooperative:

“I can’t go and say to them that I want to become a member. It’s not like a random person can be involved with them. It’s like they pick whoever they want to pick (...) And I’ve seen that being a part of the cooperative is like being the president. They sit down and have everything. And since I’m not a part of the cooperative, I feel left out (...) Every time we have benefits coming to the community, the coordinator only picks the benefits for the cooperative. And the other people are left out (...) I don’t have anywhere to store water. I would like to have that support. I would like to have the benefits that other people do.”

When someone else was listening while I conducted the interview, most interviewees thanked Mercedes for all she had done to them and to the community. When alone, several people expressed that they felt left out. An elderly neighbor visited Mercedes’s family almost every day when I was there, and seemed to be a good friend of the family. When I went to visit her alone at her house, she was clearly upset with Mercedes and the cooperative for not considering her, regardless of her efforts to support the cooperative:

“I feel bad. I feel left out. Sometimes I wonder why they’re acting like that when I’m always supporting. It’s like I don’t exist in this community. They don’t think about me. And I remember some people from the outside came for a meeting. And they asked, who were the sickest people in the community. They didn’t include me [when she was sick]. The only one was [a family member of an elite member].”

To further illustrate how some may be benefitting more from the cooperative than others, I will use Jennifer, Mercedes’s daughter as an example. She is given many opportunities that

did not seem to be there for the other members of the cooperative. The same non-elite member as earlier thinks it is unfair that only a few benefits from the cooperative:

“The ones who are closer to them are the ones who get trainings, they even go to hotels. They don’t take us into account. I would like to go outside to meet more people. Only the ones who are closer are taken into account. Like Mercedes’s daughter.”

An NGO built several houses for members of the community. As I understood it, the houses were given to the poorest people of the community, regardless of cooperative membership. Jennifer and her sister had one of these house each and, in addition, Jennifer had one on offer to visitors, which we stayed in while there. Although it seemed like Mercedes was the one arranging it, Jennifer was the one who owned it. She normally took US\$20 a night per person for the room, including three meals a day. Jennifer was the only one I encountered in the community who had an extra house for visitors.

When I met Mercedes during the delegation, she told me that all the cooperative members had these little houses on offer to guests. Coming there however, I observed that the people with these houses were poor and had no other opportunity than using these houses to live in. It is unclear to me whether this information was a misunderstanding, deliberate misinformation or a wish for the future.

Furthermore, Jennifer goes to cooking school once a week, paid for by a wealthy woman and owner of a hotel who lives close by. Her goal is for everyone in the community to have jobs within the community, and she funds education for some young people for them to be valuable for the community later. She also pays for Jennifer’s cooking studies and in return, Jennifer will be working in her hotel kitchen when she is finished studying.

Discussion

Positive outcomes

The women’s cooperative in Campo Fresco has undoubtedly achieved a lot. It has contributed to a positive development for the community in terms of material standards such as electricity, new roads and a primary school. For the elite, I would argue that being a member has not only contributed to material development, but to the empowerment process.

Developing skills and gaining control in one’s life is one of McWhirter’s (1997) dimensions of empowerment, and through trainings, meetings and workshops, the elite has developed

skills and capacities. They have learned how to run a cooperative, new handcraft skills and new agricultural practices like agroecology and how to welcome visitors and tourists. They are less shy, feel significant and dare to speak up, and on their way to becoming agents in their own lives. For example for Lea, being in the cooperative has been an arena for her to practice her dream as a teacher, and she has been given the opportunity to work towards that.

A sign of the elite's agency is their increased self-confidence because of these new skills. The elite showed many examples of this. For example by taking a premium price for their products or targeting NGOs, projects and collaboration partners. Getting to know the cooperative's work, they seemed to be headhunting projects, not the other way around. They appeared as a robust cooperative with many projects going on; if some of the initiatives did not work out, they had enough other ones to survive and still develop. This is in contrast to the cooperative in Lugar del Lago, which only had two projects and when these two did not work out, they were left with nothing to develop further.

Their robustness was also an advantage for the rural tourism project. They were continuously working to develop their hosting facilities, but had enough else going on to not lose motivation or a significant income if they experienced a period with less visitors. They were hosting people as an addition to their agriculture and daily activities, and it seemed to work out for them. Las Chispas did not use social media for marketing, but used connections in networks and organizations to attract visitors. In contrast to Lugar del Lago, this cooperative had a huge network and many collaboration partners and because of this, their rural tourism did not seem to lack guests.

The elite used their social network actively to meet their goals and develop further. They took advantage of every opportunity to develop themselves by using all their resources, for example by making jewelry, coffee candles or offering housing to tourists and groups. They were using their social and material resources and agency to create opportunities and new sources of income.

Decision making and power

One part of agency is decision making (Kabeer, 1999). Before getting involved in the cooperative, Esther and Rosa said they were only in their homes as they had no reason to go out. Now, they can choose to make decisions in their lives and participate on meetings, trainings, workshops or travel to other communities. In addition, all the elite members had an independent income at the time of visit, which they did not have before (except Mercedes).

They managed their own money and Esther felt significant by contributing to the household's economy.

For agency to be used as “evidence” of empowerment, it has to have transformatory potential (Kabeer, 1999). The elite said they felt excluded from the community's decision-making before as women, but proving their position as a cooperative, they have used their agency transformatorily and gained power in the community to make decisions. Esther, Mercedes and Scarleth all said they feel more respected in the community now, being members in the cooperative. This indicates that they have challenged structures such as machismo, changed relationships and status in the community and is working towards gender equality. According to Kroeker (1995), one of empowerment's central aspects is increased status in the society. In this quote, Mercedes talk about their position in the community:

“We wanted to earn the men's and the young people's confidence. And we accomplished it. Because now they say, the men and the young people, that here in Campo Fresco the women are the one who rule. We were not the ones who told them to say that. They say that because they respect us.”

McWhirter's (1991) definition of empowerment emphasizes that empowerment should not be at other's expense. Several of the interviewees from outside the elite confirmed the elite's power, and some were unhappy with the position the elite had. There seemed to be several difficult power relations in the community. In contrast to McWhirter (1991), Kabeer's (1999) framework takes into account that agency can take the form of *power over*, where deception and manipulation can take place. Whether this has happened here is outside the scope of this thesis to answer, but there are clear indications that something is going on.

A couple of interviewed non-members claimed that the cooperative was just for a selected group, whilst Mercedes's explanation was that the other women were not committed enough. For example, she said women with difficulties paying the member fees were offered manageable timeframes to pay, but always had excuses for not doing so. Esther pointed out that some did not want to be involved because they did not want the responsibility of being a member. Furthermore, Mercedes said that many people were only interested in the cooperative for the benefits, not for supporting each other and sharing risks. This matched up with my findings, as several people outside the elite largely had a focus on benefits.

The difficult relationship experienced by the non-elite might be about them feeling insignificant, and without opportunities to join the cooperative. Asking Mercedes about

inequalities within the cooperative, she only talked about economic reasons and seemed sincerely ignorant to power relations issues. The elite's powerfulness and empowerment may be in the way of the non-elite members' empowerment process.

Although there were disagreements concerning the cooperative's openness, it is difficult to say what the non-elite have done to participate or to be included. If the reason for not being an active member is "laziness, incompetence or individual preference and priorities" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438), power relations are not relevant. This is relevant, only if the non-elite members are not able to choose if they can be active members or not. Another point Kabeer (1999) makes is that people who are struggling to meet their basic needs are often less likely to prioritize long-term and exercise meaningful choice, which can be a contributing factor here.

The cooperative's existence seem to have caused or exaggerated difficulties and conflicts in this community. When someone from the community suddenly gain power, it can amplify inequalities and already existing conflicts. And although the elite does not intend to have *power over*, being in charge of a cooperative that received material assets puts them in that situation anyway.

Powerful leadership

Mercedes with her long history of working with women's rights and empowerment has been vital the community, especially many of the women. As Mercedes started the process of empowerment many years before the initiation of the women cooperative in Campo Fresco, she is not seen as one of the elite-members who are being empowered because of being in this cooperative. Even though I see Mercedes as an empowered woman, this thesis' research question looks at empowerment through participation in cooperatives; Mercedes has been empowered for longer than that. However, Mercedes is an invaluable resource for the community and for many of the other members' empowerment process.

Many of my interviewees expressed the importance of having her as a role model and leader, sometimes even in terms of being "helpless" without her. In the following quote, Rosa explains how Mercedes "saved the community" from starvation after heavy rain. This is one of many quotes where people emphasize Mercedes's significance for the community and cooperative:

"For example, we had rain that destroyed the road. And since we had a lot of rain, we had to stay inside. We didn't work and we run out of things. So arranged a cooperative meeting, wondering what we would do about it. So

Mercedes started working on it. And then suddenly, we received food for the little kids, for the other people and for us.”

With their work, Mercedes and the cooperative has gained many community members, but not all equally. Some non-elites are not satisfied with the cooperative's distribution of benefits and it seems to be an expectancy for Mercedes and the elite to “fix” the community. One of the non-elite members said in an interview: “*They [the elite] keep working, and wherever they go, we follow them*”. Are people expecting too much from Mercedes and the elite? And should a cooperative benefit all equally regardless of their efforts?

Las Chispas has had a massive impact on their community with their achievements, but still the cooperative is not benefitting everyone. However, for the elite members, they have more opportunities, are more social and more aware than they were before. It has created alternatives of choice and enhanced their ability to make them, which is central for empowerment (Kabeer, 1999). If the goal of empowerment is “to increase control over their lives, access to resources, self-confidence, and status in society” (Kroecker, 1995, p. 750), the cooperative's elite are empowering themselves by being active members in the cooperative.

The cooperative dynamic for Las Chispas is very different from the one in Lugar del Lago. In Campo Fresco they have Mercedes and the elite, who always work to find new projects and initiatives to contribute to the community and all of the elite members seemed highly motivated. One of McWhirter's (1997, p. 224) criteria for empowerment is to “support the empowerment of others in their community”. They seem to support the empowerment for those who are motivated and lucky enough to be included in their work, but not for all. With that being said, the elite cannot take full responsibility for all members' empowerment.

A change in men's attitudes

In both cooperatives, but Campo Fresco especially, the members have made many achievements. Kabeer (1999) emphasizes that one should question whether these achievements have been made as a result of agency, or if existing inequalities has been left unchallenged. With examples from both field sites, this section focuses on how women in the two cooperatives have used their agency to challenge structural inequalities in terms of machismo and men's attitudes.

Results

Better off alone

Before La Cooperativa las Mujeres Chispas' initiation, there was a mixed sex cooperative in the community, with men leaders. Mercedes was not impressed by the work they did, as they did not work with the changes the community needed. At this time, some women in the community started working for improving living conditions. Mercedes said it soon became an expectancy for women to "fix" the community's problems. Several of the women wanted to formally start a women's only cooperative to be able to achieve even more. After initiating the women's cooperative, Mercedes says some men were skeptical towards the women's work:

"I used to cry back then because men said I brainwashed the women here. They talked behind my back, asked why I was here. Especially why I was giving land to women, because they should be doing laundry, cooking. Maybe they would kill me. But I wanted to stay here, I wanted to keep fighting for this community."

After seeing what the women's cooperative had accomplished, men became more amenable:

"In 2008 they [an NGO] approved the school project, we told them that the kids in this community didn't have a proper place to study. That had a huge impact on this community. Men softened up, they were not as rigid as they used to be. They saw all the good things we as women brought to this community."

Esther thinks there is more respect for the women and more women's empowerment in the Campo Fresco community than other places because of the cooperative. In Campo Fresco's neighboring community, there was a mixed gender cooperative with a male board. A woman member said in an interview that she felt systematically excluded from decision-making. For example, the board would not inform her about meetings and would take advantage of her illiteracy. She said she would not get any benefits from being a member.

Most men and women I interviewed seem to agree that Mujeres del Volcán and Las Chispas did not include men because it meant problems in terms of disagreements and men's dominance. In this quote, Karen in Lugar del Lago says why she thinks it would be different if they included men: *"Because men are like dictators. We've seen that, they're really tough. Unlike women, we laugh, we talk, we're happy. But if there is a man, it's not the same. Even worse, if it's someone's husband."*

A change through participation

Brenda (33) in Campo Fresco is one of several women who experienced a change for herself and her husband. She moved to the community a few years back because of domestic abuse with her previous husband. Because of her economic situation, she is not a member of Las Chispas. Instead, she is what they call a supporter, who helps the cooperative with their work. In return, she participates in many of the cooperative's activities, trainings and workshops, and has travelled to Honduras twice on the cooperative's behalf. Through the cooperative's activities, Brenda says she has *learned how to love herself, what her value is and what her rights as a woman are*. In the following quote, Brenda tells me about an incidence with her new husband where things were getting rough between them:

“The abuse was about to start here too, but this time I said ‘no’ (...) So the first time, I accepted the abuse, but the second time I didn’t. Because I said: ‘I’m worth a lot’. The last time we has an incidence, my husband locked me in the house so I looked around and I grabbed an axe and hit him in the back. But I was not going to kill him. That was not my intension. And he was yelling at me: ‘Mercedes has gotten you crazy, taking you everywhere’. And I said to him ‘No no no, you are the one who drives me crazy’ (...) That was the last time we had an incidence, I feel like that’s a lesson. Now I can go everywhere I want, but he knows where I’m going. He knows it’s because of work. Ironically, after that we shook hands. We were in peace. And now both of us do the duties in the house, not just me as it used to be. Sometimes he cooks food. We learned a lesson that day.”

Rosa tells me about the gender trainings she has participated on, and how her relationship with her husband has changed:

“We talk about gender [in trainings], that you have to talk with your husband, that he is not the one in charge, that both of us are (...) in the beginning, he [her husband] didn’t really like it. But now, he’s ok with it. He’s also ok with me going to the meetings, the trainings. And actually, when I come back, he has done some work here. Because for example before, when I went to the meetings. I had to come back really quickly and do the work in the house. But now, when I go out, I know he’s going to be here in the house, and he’s going to be working in the house when I get back.”

Also in Lugar del Lago, Karen has experienced a change. She wanted to join the women's cooperative to get out of her old environment of machismo with beating and abuse from her husband. She tells me how the participation in the cooperative has helped her:

“The men said that we can't do anything. So I got involved with other women, to participate and exchange (...) As the time passed, I've been learning what my rights are. I realized I was able to work on my own. That I have to be valued. That has helped me a lot (...) If I go to the meetings now, I only say that I'm not going to be home for a while. And before it was like, if he said yes it was yes, if he said no, it was no.”

Also for her intimacy, she has experienced a change:

“I don't sleep with him [her husband], I sleep in a different bed. He doesn't force me to sleep with him now. Before he used to force me. I did it, but it was not like I wanted to. But one day I said, you're going to stay in your dormitory, and I have mine. And if we agreed to do it, we would do it. I feel good this way.”

Karen also tells me she can handle her own money now, which she did not have access to just a few years back. She says she and her husband has a separate economy now, and have divided the work on the land between them. She has her own business and is proud to handle the animals on her own and knowing their value. She knows what she wants now and her husband only interferes if she asks for it.

In Yulissa's household, she is the one handling the money. Her husband was comfortable with Yulissa doing that and being an active woman, travelling, working and making decisions. He seemed supportive of her, and while we were there, her husband would take the dishes at least once a day. Over the last ten years, Yulissa has participated in many trainings and learnt about issues connected to women's rights and empowerment. Several of the people I interviewed, Yulissa's husband included, said she was a resource for the community sharing her knowledge with the other women. Her dynamic with her husband was an example on living the life she tried teaching others. Yulissa explains what empowerment means for her:

“Some organizations have come here and they have taught us how to empower ourselves, being independent. And in my case, I feel that I have empowered myself. I've had hard meetings. I've been pretty involved in them. And that has

been very helpful. Because we say being empowered doesn't mean you have to change your husband for another man. It means what we are going to change are our husband's attitudes (...) Being empowered is like defending your own rights. And you could see how my husband took the dishes. And like today he said, I am going to wash them. Because I've been sharing all these things with him. About how to live together in peace. Because being women doesn't mean we have to do all the work in the house. They can also do it. And we as women can do the work in the land as well."

Discussion

Being only women

Many of the interviewees said the machismo culture in Nicaragua is predominant. They mentioned gender inequalities within mixed sex cooperatives they previously had been a part of, or was a part of, as a problem. This was the reason that both cooperatives only allowed women in their cooperatives. Manchón and Macleod's (2010, p. 377) study found that "[w]omen are welcome in the cooperatives as long as they don't question power relations or take on leadership positions'. When in women-only cooperatives, women are freed from machismo culture and they have to a higher degree the space to speak, participate and take leadership roles, which is a basis for the empowerment process (Bacon, 2010), and also the case in the two cooperatives, for some of the women.

In Campo Fresco, one man I interviewed expressed that he also wanted to join the cooperative and felt excluded because he was a man. Another man said he was fine with being excluded and did not see it as a problem that there were only women in the cooperative. They, as men, worked six days a week and did not have time to run a cooperative anyway. Seeing the benefits and the positive effects on the community's development achieved by the women also increased the women's social position. Furthermore, most interviewees outside the elite, not just men, expressed feeling left out, discussed in the previous chapter. Most people also had a focus on receiving benefits, and did not seem to be too concerned about other aspects of being in a cooperative.

In a previous paper (Berntsen, 2017), I emphasize the importance of including men when women want to change their lives. Many of the women in the two cooperatives had been to trainings with topics as *empowerment*, *women's rights* and *gender equality* and were encouraged to talk about this with their life-partners. Although this was not the case for all

members, the examples above illustrate how many women have talked to their life-partners and by doing so, changed with their support.

A women-only cooperative in a patriarchal society like Nicaragua can give women more space to change (Bacon, 2010). In his study comparing mixed and women-only cooperatives in Nicaragua, Bacon (2010) found significant gender inequalities within mixed sex cooperatives, and less empowerment among women than men. The main reasons were men occupying leadership positions and women being less likely to own land. As land ownership gives advantages in a cooperative, it weakened women's position not having access to that. In women-only cooperatives, however, Bacon (2010) found the highest indications of empowerment. Men in mixed cooperatives were relatively less empowered, while women in mixed least.

Redistribution of power and tasks

In the examples above, women in the two cooperatives have used their resources (trainings, support in each other) and agency (knowing their value and rights to confront their life-partners) to achieve changes. In all examples, there has been a redistribution of power within their households, which is an essential part of the empowerment process (Moser, 1989; Rowlands, 1997). This redistribution works as positive feedback and a resource for the women, as a supportive husband can contribute even more to their empowerment process. This form of power does not imply "zero sum" or *power over* others' rather amplifies the women's *power from within* and *power to*.

Rosa and Brenda in Campo Fresco said their husbands have done more housework since they started in the cooperative. Redistribution of household tasks means that women are freed from their triple roles to do other things like education, income-generating activities or being active in a cooperative (Nibbierd, n.d). Rosa says that because her husband also contributes to the housework, she can participate in meetings without rushing home. This way, the women have challenged and change structures and gender roles that has hindered their process of empowerment in the past.

Intimate partner violence

Many men are afraid of women's empowerment as this, if using *power over*, implies that men loses power, if women get more (Rowlands, 1997). For many years, Karen's husband had *power over* her by restricting her freedom and physically, sexually and psychologically abusing her. In an interview with Karen's husband, asking about gender equality and

women's value, he seemed ashamed by his past. Although he did not explicitly talk about his personal behavior, he seem to distance himself from his own experience by answering "correct" and in general sense:

"Even I sometimes said that the woman should be in the house, but I think no. The world has woke up and it's different now. The woman has her own place (...) The woman has to develop her role as a woman, as a wife. She has her rights. All of that has been changing, the rights of the woman, the laws."

He excused himself for what he had done, without saying it explicitly, by saying that time has changed, that everything was more primitive before and that people now gained new knowledge. Also after the interview was over, he continued saying this.

In the case of Karen's abuse, her husband had *power over* her for many years and hindered her freedom. Over the last years, Karen has learnt what she is worth and stood up for herself. The support and trainings from the cooperative has played a crucial part of this process not only with new knowledge, but as support and *power with* the other members. She has used her agency to develop a sense of *power to*, which is explained as the ability to challenge or resist *power over* (Rowlands, 1997)

Also Brenda's case shows how gaining new knowledge and having the support of other women can be vital for well-being. For Brenda, it was a resource to learn her rights and having the support of the other women. Having a safe space to build confidence and exchange ideas and experiences with other women have also contributed to her agency and *power to*. One part of the empowerment process is becoming aware of power dynamics (McWhirter, 1991), and by doing so, Brenda was able to avert a starting abuse with her new husband and in this aspect of her life, securing her well-being. Even though Brenda is just a supporting of the cooperative, her example illustrates what one can achieve from being a part of a women's group if one takes advantage of the opportunities.

Manchón and Macleod (2010) found that challenging gender inequalities works best if there is a strong women leader in the organization. For Las Chispas, Mercedes has been an indispensable woman leader for addressing gender inequalities in the community. During Brenda's interview, she emphasized how Mercedes has supported her and taught her how valuable she is. Although Mercedes's daughter's presence during the interview might have exaggerated this, I believe her statements on Mercedes's role to be sincere. Mercedes has

actively worked for eliminating domestic violence in Campo Fresco for many years, by teaching women their rights and confronting violent men.

With the achievements the cooperatives (especially Las Chispas) have made, they have shown that women are able to run a cooperative successfully and have slowly gained a respected position in the community. This can give the women self-confidence and amplify their feeling of self-worth also in other situations and work as a positive feedback for empowerment. Even though the cooperative member have not managed to completely “remove the existence and effects of unjust inequalities” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 16), they are working towards it.

Conclusion

Being a woman in rural Nicaragua can be challenging, and both cooperatives worked hard to create a sustainable living and a better future for themselves. Although not all initiatives are equally successful for all members, they have created additional sources of income from and in addition to their agricultural activities, and they have been a platform for the women to become empowered.

Not all members of the cooperatives have started on an individual empowerment process. In Campo Fresco, only the elite members, or members accepted by the elite, would benefit from the cooperative. These members, however, gained new knowledge, opportunities for change, increased self-confidence and new social relations, everything a part of a new way to use and access **resources**.

The cooperatives have been platforms for members in both field sites to be more social, see new places and develop new **relationships** with other women. Also, women who have been in the empowerment process for a long time inspire and support new members to start their own empowerment process. Building social relations and *power with* the other members have been a resource for many of the women to exercise choice and to find their own *power to*.

With new resources and *power to*, several women have challenged **structural** obstacles such as the machismo culture; learned new skills and tools to communicate with their life-partners and to negotiate their own freedom. This way, they have been able to be relieved from their **triple roles** by getting more help with the household and are therefore able to do other things than to work in the home.

Even though human **agency** is difficult to measure, there were several indications of agency in both cooperatives. In Campo Fresco, I observed that the elite or the ones that were accepted

by them were given space to exercise their agency. As they had many projects going on, all the active members found something unique they wanted to work on and this way they defined and decided their own path. This motivated them to keep on working and developing the cooperative and themselves. In Lugar del Lago on the other hand, I found that exercising agency was more difficult as most members did not define or decide what to work on themselves. Here, with only a few exceptions, I learned that most people seemed to lack agency and motivation to move on.

The members' **achievements** varied from person to person, depending on their own efforts, and their commitments to the cooperative or their relationship with the elite members and leaders. In Campo Fresco, the community benefited in terms of increased material standards, although only a few members seemed to have made significant achievements on a personal level. In Lugar del Lago the cooperative had made minor achievements as a cooperative and some on a personal level, but as a whole they expressed a feeling of not being able to move forward.

All in all, cooperatives for women in Nicaragua can be a venue for challenging machismo culture, for developing a social network and to build confidence. Although I found that cooperatives were not a platform for all women to become empowered, it clearly was for others.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1 – Reflection on the content and process of my thesis

With a background as a natural scientist, I wanted to learn more about the social aspects of agriculture for my master's thesis. I wanted to put my plant technical knowledge into a context, to gain a more holistic understanding of agriculture. As this is at the core of the master's program in agroecology, I knew this was what I wanted devote my studies to.

Conducting fieldwork in a developing country was for me an intense and exhausting experience. At the same time, it was a real, honest and eye opening; I have found that it is in those situations that demand the most of you that you learn and develop the most. Also, my relationship to my experiences in Nicaragua have changed over time. As I worked with the data, I gained more respect for it. While being in Nicaragua, and shortly after, I could not understand why the women in Lugar del Lago did not just use their facebook page to attract visitors. As I developed a better understanding of the women's situation, I gained more respect for their choices. This has thought me that it is not enough just going somewhere and seeing something; you also need to reflect upon your experiences. You may go somewhere and experience something and never fully understand what really happened.

As anything else in life, my fieldwork did not go the way I planned. I spent almost two weeks at a field site that I end up not including in my thesis. If I were to go again, I would spend much more time exploring rural tourism, especially agrotourism, and probably include another field site in the island of Ometepe. I would also have asked different questions during the interviews. Regardless of how determined I was on asking open-ended questions before I went, I realize now that many of them were not, due to limited experience conducting interviews and from being biased. Going back, I wish I had an even greater focus on understanding what the women in the cooperatives wanted from life, if they were happy with their situation, not only what this project and cooperative had done for them.



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