HER MONEY, MY SWEAT:
WOMEN ORGANIZING TO TRANSFORM GLOBALIZATION

Submitted to the
School of Interdisciplinary Studies
(Western College Program)
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Philosophy
Interdisciplinary Studies

by
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Oxford, Ohio
2007

APPROVED

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ABSTRACT

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Women who live in Third World nations are disproportionately negatively affected by globalization. Moreover, theorizations of Third World women’s economic hardships are often characterized in terms of their victimization and helplessness even within Western feminist literature. Such characterizations have been intensely criticized in the last two decades by Third World and postcolonial feminist theorists who have effectively exposed the dangers of representing Third World women as a homogenized group. Western feminist discourse on gender, globalization, and Third World cultures has since made inroads toward addressing the specificity of identity issues such as race, class, and nationality, and in bridging the gap between the objectives of Western and non-Western women’s groups. Within discussions of the inequities of globalization and in efforts to organize women around globalization issues, negotiating similar identity issues and goals is a constant challenge.

With an emphasis on the intersection of theory and practice, this thesis argues that for transnational feminist networks to organize constructively on globalization issues in the Third World, the agency and experience of local actors must be regarded as a primary source of legitimate knowledge. Only in this way will transnational feminist networks, which operate across both geographical and intangible borders, be successful in empowering local actors and in producing more viable, counter-hegemonic economic opportunities than currently exist under processes of globalization. Through the empowerment of local actors, more sustainable, long-term projects that resist globalization can develop without, or with less, dependence on First World actors and the transnational networks themselves. The Women’s International Sewing Cooperative of Nueva Vida, Nicaragua provides a practical example of successful transnational organizing that legitimates and accounts for local experience and knowledge. The result is a more viable economic opportunity than those presently offered by globalization, and is one that empowers Third World women and grants them the agency to define and determine their economic futures, thus demonstrating the real power implicit in crafting strategies from both theory and practice.
To my grandmothers —

Grace Irene Bates Brown and Marilyn Joyce Wheeler Maupin

— who inspire me from beyond this world.
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<td>COMAMNUVI</td>
<td>Cooperativa Maquiladora Mujeres de Nueva Vida Internacional (Women’s International Sewing Cooperative of Neuva Vida)</td>
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<td>FTZ</td>
<td>Free trade zone</td>
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<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<td>JHC-CDCA</td>
<td>Jubilee House Community-Center for Development in Central America</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Nongovernmental organization</td>
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<td>SAP</td>
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<td>UN</td>
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Bená Burda and Mary Buchanan of Maggie’s Organics and Becca Renk of the Jubilee House Community for their generosity, time, and expertise.

Also, I could not have managed without the critical eye of Dr. Yvonne Keller and her suggestions that helped refine the focus and arguments of this thesis.

Nor could I have survived without the positive reinforcement — and humor — of Dr. William Newell. The earth may not tilt back, but at least my brain did not turn to glue.
The cooperative I visited with a Witness for Peace delegation was not the most indelible memory I retained from Nicaragua. What I recall most are brilliant inconsistencies — golden glowing landscapes, liquid skies, and the putrid haze of Lake Managua; sinuous, tanned coffee farmers and diseased, skin-splotched rural workers protesting fruit companies’ use of a toxic worm pesticide; decrepit, earthquake damaged monuments, cardboard and tin ghettos, and the pristine presidential palace and new baseball stadium; the whisper of Augusto Sandino’s legacy everywhere.

The Women’s International Sewing Cooperative of Nueva Vida is in itself a Nicaraguan inconsistency. A group of extremely poor women organized to plan, construct, and manage a functional business that became a free trade zone, attracts foreign dollars and — this is the real inconsistency compared to other free trade zones — recycles those foreign dollars into the equally poor local community.

To me, this equates good globalization. The despairing side is that this working business model of good globalization is lost in the white noise of economic and political agendas. Even nongovernmental organizations, transnational networks, and other groups focused on development and globalization issues have been slow to foster similar methods among other desperately poor Third World communities like Nueva Vida.

Conversations with Bená Burda, co-founder and owner of Maggie’s Organics, gave rise to the title of this project. Through poor experiences with other sewing contractors, Burda realized if workers became invested in the final product, quality would improve and shipments would be timely. Thus, she recognized the potential a worker-owned sewing cooperative had for both the worker-owners and for her clothing company. The
cooperative would connect workers to the product while still ensuring a sweat free, fair labor result.

In order to achieve that result, however, Burda invested a great deal of time and money into the cooperative. Hence, when she described her relationship to her former business partner as “her money, my sweat,” it seemed equally well suited to express an aspect of Burda’s connection to the cooperative. Likewise, “her money, my sweat” brought to mind the monetary support given by mainly First World, privileged organizations and networks to primarily poor, Third World populations. In the case of the cooperative, the nonprofit organization Jubilee House Community extended low interest start-up loans and access to other short-term loans as the women labored daily for almost two years to construct their factory.

For those women, who are now worker-owners in a business they literally built from scratch, “her money, my sweat” is a compelling illustration of their journey to achieve a pipe dream turned reality.
INTRODUCTION
The Politics of Naming

Language is a persuasive tool for both empowerment and disempowerment. It is imperative to reframe the terms of discussion used here in a way that takes into account the implicit layers of constructed meaning and hierarchical undertones. As Nancy Naples refers to it, the politics of naming (2002, 4), a play on Adrienne Rich’s “politics of location,” is the method by which new terms are appropriated to convey a feminist conceptualization that limits exclusionary or insinuated messages.

Jacques Derrida, of deconstructionist philosophy, “argues that Western philosophy largely rests on opposites … whereby the nature and primacy of the first term depends on the definition of its opposite (other) and whereby the first term is also superior to the second” (Marchand 1995, 3). Given this understanding of the construction of language and the meaning of binaries, the realization is that coupled terms such as developed/developing, global/local, First World/Third World, male/female, white/black, etc. convey meaning beyond the dictionary definition. We must question, “Who is using these terms and where? To whom and why do these categories seem useful?” (Grewal 10). Bearing in mind Derrida’s argument, it is imperative to redefine and appropriate terms like those above, as well as uncoupled terms that suggest a similar hierarchy of meaning, so as to achieve a clarity of communication in which the dominance of terminology is exposed and brought to a new level of significance within an interdisciplinary framework.

There are a few such terms that must be explicated and reconstructed for the linguistic purposes of this project. The first of these involves binary opposites of the sort Derrida
theorized as imparting a superior/inferior connotation. The term *Third World*, as opposed to *First World*, is a highly contested construct of past political maneuvering. Yet, many leading postcolonial feminist scholars, including the likes of Chandra Mohanty and Uma Narayan, continue to use the phrase. They are quick to indicate that Third World is used with careful attentiveness to its historical and contemporary significance.

The origins of Third World, as well as the so-called First World and Second World, are derived from the post-World War II era during which “the term ‘third world’ originally signified a ‘third force’ of non-aligned nations which would wedge themselves between the Cold War opposition of first world ‘democracy’ and second world ‘communism’” (Bulbeck 34). The Second World has all but disappeared save for China and Cuba, nations which are often absorbed into the categorization Third World for they are now considered “developing” nations (as opposed to “developed,” another problematic binary in which one must challenge who or what decides which nations are “developed” and by what standards). Yet, this description maintains the dominance of the First World, or developed nations, over the Third World, or developing nations, and places First World nations as the standard for all others.

Since the post-World War II era, the terms First and Third World have come to imply an uneven plane of power in which the Third World is composed of “underdeveloped or developing nations that [are] economically disadvantaged” (Naples 2002, 5) while the First World is characterized by nations that are wealthy, militarily strong, and often have the most power in international institutions such as the UN and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Due to economic disadvantages, the Third World is “therefore dependent on First World nations for financial, scientific, and technical assistance”
These terms are heavily criticized for their justification of the “construction of the First World countries as dominant and more advanced” (Naples 2002, 5). This criticism makes it difficult to justify the usage of Third World rather than less connotatively tainted expressions, such as North/South. Even new inventions for or usages of the terms First and Third World would seem more appropriate, and certainly quite a few scholars have taken this route and devised alternative phrases. Nevertheless, in most cases the binary remains. For instance, instead of First/Third World, developed/underdeveloped, North/South, Western/non-Western may be used, but each set still implies the meaning of First/Third World, i.e. modern/non-modern or superior/inferior. Chandra Mohanty points out:

But in comparison with other similar formulations such as “North/South” and “advanced/underdeveloped nations,” “Third World” retains a certain heuristic value and explanatory specificity in relation to the inheritance of colonialism and contemporary neocolonial economic and geopolitical processes that the other formulations lack. (2003a, 143-4)

It is inadequate to characterize Third World nations by their differences to First World nations; however, as Mohanty indicates, the specificity of the terms First and Third World and the historical and political implications they entail justify their usage in the context of this project.

In a similar vein, Third World will be used for the remainder of the project to connote nations that have not, by the international community’s standards, achieved the economic competency of a First World nation, as well as a descriptor of people who live within those nations. The use of Third World, as opposed to North/South or some other variant, is preferable not only because it is problematic to use alternative designations to convey
the significance of the phrase, but also because Third World carries with it the weight of colonial dominance and the violence, turmoil, and destruction that was left in its wake. Presently, the aftermath of colonialism is still evident in the cultural, political, economic, and environmental fabric of so-called Third World nations. Conscious of the hierarchical and binary significance implicit in the representations of First World and Third World, the phrases will be used with “a sensitivity to the contestations surrounding their usage and an awareness of how ‘relations of ruling’ infuses all attempts to represent diverse women’s lives and diverse locations with a singular categorization” (Naples 2002, 5).

Nevertheless, the conceptualization of the Third World still fails, in the words of Chandra Mohanty, to “comprehensively [characterize] the economic, political, racial, and cultural differences within the border of Third World nations” (2003a, 143).

Feminist scholarship devoted to the First/Third World language debate echoes a similar debate in regard to the term globalization. It is hotly contested as to what the accepted word actually represents. Manisha Desai summarizes two major sides of the debate: Some analysts associate globalization with the homogenization of global capital into one world market while other analysts emphasize the heterogeneity that results from “global flows of people, ideas, and images” (Naples 15). Desai further comments on the debate by remarking that “these two apparently contrasting views appear not so contradictory when one recognizes that each view … focus[es] on only one aspect of globalization — the political-economic dimensions in the case of the ‘homogenizers,’ and the cultural practices in the case of the ‘heterogenizers’” (Naples 15-16). This distinction enables the recognition of various positions and interpretations that have been and may be taken on the issue of globalization.
Given the significance afforded to the establishment of a reformed and fundamentally different construction of globalization within critical analyses, imagery of reconstruction is often a common theme. Therefore, some globalization scholars choose not to use the term globalization in an effort to expose its underlying meanings. Marianne Marchand argues that globalization “has become associated with a certain (pro-free market) ideology. … therefore [it is] preferable to use the term ‘global restructuring’ over ‘globalization’ since the former term ‘explicitly refers to a process of (partially) breaking down an old order and attempting to construct a new one’” (Marchand 1996 qtd. in Marchand 2000, 7). Due to the myriad of terminological preferences among the scholarship surveyed here, it is difficult to adopt one as the overarching term for what is, in essence, the global economy and its processes. While this project argues that globalization must be transformed in order to create space for more equitable economic exchange and participation, alternate expressions cannot convey as precisely the multiple meanings implicit in globalization. It strikes an intelligible note with activists, neoclassical economists, feminists, development theorists and others that cannot be replicated by other terms, despite the divergent understandings of globalization. Globalization, for these reasons, will be used for the remainder of this text. Nonetheless, it is critical to keep in mind the multiple definitions of the global economy — as a political, economic, historical, and culturally relevant phenomenon.

The context of the international has come to characterize an omnipresent force, one that implies sweeping generalizations of sovereignty, cultures, and peoples of the world. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty describe the international as “a notion of universal patriarchy operating in a transhistorical way to subordinate all women”
(Alexander xix). On the other hand, the transnational has broken ground in feminist theorizing with scholars such as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan utilizing it in order to “problematize a purely locational politics of global-local or center-periphery in favor of … [seeing] the lines cutting across them” (Grewal 13). The center/periphery model offers another nefarious binary. The center points toward the known, the dominant, the “superior” force, whereas knowledges, peoples, cultures, and histories relegated to the periphery are unknowns, are suppressed, are left out of the dominant ideology, and otherwise are “inferior.” This dichotomy is disturbing when embodied in metanarratives, or quests for “truth.” Therefore, “the lines cutting across” the boundary of center to periphery is particularly significant in theorizing on the transnational.

Referring to global interactions or the international as the transnational has freed scholars from the boundaries within which the former terms operate. Transnational promotes “an understanding of a set of unequal relationships among and between peoples” (Alexander xix) and manages to intersect on multiple locational levels. Transnational will supplant the notion of the international throughout this text; however, it is important to note that transnational is not a mere substitution for international, but rather an alternative set of notions that derive meaning from nonhierarchical constructions.

Overview of Chapters

This project endeavors to bridge a widening gap between theory and practice through an interdisciplinary approach that puts into conversation multiple perspectives. This

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approach has produced fresh perceptions regarding the intersections between neoliberal globalization processes, feminist theory, transnational organizing strategies, and the agency and knowledge of Third World actors. Through this interdisciplinary approach, an increased ability to analyze a number of positions in concert has generated an improved framework for analyzing transnational organizing strategies in the context of gendered globalization. The Women’s International Sewing Cooperative of Nueva Vida (COMAMNUVI), located in a poor neighborhood just a few miles from Managua, Nicaragua, is a lived example of the potential results successful transnational organizing techniques can bring to fruition. The cooperative serves as a point of convergence for the interdisciplinary mode of theory that informs elements of the cooperative’s success.

Theorizations of Third World women and the economic hardships of Third World women are often characterized in terms of their victimization and helplessness. Such representations of Third World women become monolithic, even within Western feminist literature. The first chapter of this project details the problematics of the so-called “average” Third World woman and the notion of “global sisterhood,” both of which are characteristically Western feminist conceptualizations of non-Western women/feminists. These conceptualizations have been heatedly criticized by Third World and postcolonial feminist theorists who exposed the dangers of representing Third World women as a homogenized group. Western feminist discourse on gender, globalization, and Third World cultures has since made inroads toward addressing the specificity of issues such as race, class, and nationality, and in bridging the gap between the objectives of Western and non-Western women’s groups. Still, constant awareness of these problematic understandings of Western and non-Western women is helpful in reading Western
feminist theorizations. Similarly, within discussions of the inequities of globalization and in efforts to organize women around globalization issues, negotiating similar identity issues and goals is a constant challenge.

Through an examination of the history and rise of globalization and the attention, or lack of attention, given to gender within global institutions that “govern” policies of globalization, it becomes evident that women and their economic work have been left out of the equation. There is no denying that women who live in Third World nations are disproportionately negatively affected by globalization. The second chapter explores the rationale behind women’s misrepresentation in economic theory and the additional social burdens placed on them under globalization. An exploration of neoclassical economics, upon which the tenets of globalization are founded, exposes highly masculinist attitudes toward women’s work and women’s contributions to the economy. Moreover, a discussion of the gendered mechanisms of structural adjustment programs demonstrates not only ways in which globalization is gendered in its economic rationale, but also ways in which it pressures and even counts on Third World women to take on extra, unpaid labor as social services are cut in order for nations to repay skyrocketing debts. Ameliorating such unbalanced impacts of globalization requires transforming economic evaluations to account for and make space for women’s economic contributions to societies.

While globalization is a colossal global process with many “winners” and powerful elites running the show, it also, in the view of many theorists, provides ample sites for change and resistance. Thus, a number of nongovernmental actors and networks have organized to expand, alter, and improve the landscape of globalization. Transnational
feminist networks are an example of those entities. Transnational feminist networks operate across both geographical and intangible borders and can be characterized as working almost exclusively on issues that intersect with gendered concerns. These networks also extend support, resources, and knowledge to those with whom they interact. Yet, regularly this extension of support is offered in ways that disempower, offend, or even harm the constituencies whom the network is attempting to assist. Consequently, one of the most critical components of a transnational feminist network’s strategy is to regard the agency and experience of local actors as a primary source of legitimate knowledge. Chapter three posits that transnational organizing strategies, both for feminist networks and non-feminist networks, must take into account the challenges Western feminist theorizations faced and the criticisms received from Third World and postcolonial scholars, which is explored in chapter one, and incorporate and authenticate the objectives of local actors in order to achieve a constructive end and empower communities. Only in this way will transnational feminist networks be successful in producing more viable, counter-hegemonic economic opportunities than currently exist under processes of globalization.

Through such empowerment of local activists, more sustainable, long-term actions that resist globalization can develop without, or with less, dependence on First World actors, including the transnational networks that provided initial support. The Women’s International Sewing Cooperative of Nueva Vida, Nicaragua demonstrates the sustainability of an economic alternative to globalization when the agency and experience of local actors is accepted and integrated into organizing strategies. The final chapter of this project analyzes the ways in which the Women’s International Sewing Cooperative
of Nueva Vida and the transnational network that assists it, the Jubilee House Community, have negotiated differences in experience, access to resources, and business mistakes while still maintaining the economic viability of the cooperative. The result is a practical economic alternative to those presently offered by globalization that empowers the Third World women involved and grants them the agency to define and determine their economic futures, thereby demonstrating the real power implicit in crafting strategies from both theory and practice.
CHAPTER I
Western Feminist Discourse: Unpacking Privilege

During the second, and even the third, wave of feminism, from approximately the 1970s to the 1990s, Western feminists were often guilty of essentializing women of the Third World, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Western feminists were preoccupied with equality of the sexes and male hegemony, whereas women of the Third World were concerned with daily acts of living, such as rebuilding a nation torn by war or overcoming systemic poverty. The differences in feminist goals were often overlooked by Western feminist theorists, the result being that their goals, such as achieving equal status to men, were applied universally to all women of the world. Zillah Eisenstein summarizes mainstream thought at the time: “First world women of the west represent modernity; women of the third world south and east represent tradition.”2 Women of the Third World were viewed by westerners as oppressed by traditions wrought by male dominance, rather than free participants in acts that held cultural, historical, religious, or political significance to them. The notion of a global women’s movement, based on the privileged perspectives of Western women, did not consider the variables that influence non-western women’s experiences. The prominence of Western scholarship in the global exchange of ideas permitted the circulation of these inaccurate representations of Third World women.

The topography of feminism, however, has changed drastically in the last two decades as women of color and women of the Third World have brought forth questions of concern within feminist theory and praxis. The result is a number of issues relating to the manner in which theory is applied in relation to Third World women, particularly

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concerning identity politics. Two of the most vital and inflammatory of these discussions arose from critiques of Western feminists’ representations of Third World women and the universalistic notion of global sisterhood.

“Average” Third World Woman

Chandra Mohanty, postcolonialist feminist scholar and fervent critic of inaccurate and universal portrayals of Third World women via Western feminism, notes: “Western feminist writing on women in the Third World must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship” (2003a, 21) in order for the “institutionalization of difference within feminist discourses” (2003b, 460) to be challenged. The dominant role of Western ideology in shaping the context of any discussion is important in comprehending what motivated feminists — perhaps in oblivion, perhaps in good will — to an end in which Third World women were othered, portrayed as victims, and made to seem inferior and incapable. Adrienne Rich locates this conundrum of feminist othering when she writes to white, Western feminists: “Marginalized though we have been as women, as white and Western makers of theory, we also marginalize others because our lived experience is thoughtlessly white, because even our ‘women’s cultures’ are rooted in some Western tradition” (451). The recognition of the privileging of Western writings and Western “expert” opinions reveals the fact that Third World voices and discourses are muffled by the flow of predominantly Western ideas that are valued more (by whom? for what reason?) in the global exchange of knowledge.
In uncovering these discrepancies in the marketplace of scholarship, Mohanty also suggests that Western feminists construct themselves as the normative referent when they recast difference as “other” (2003a, 22). In representations of this kind, Western feminism supplants other culturally, politically, and historically shaped notions of womanhood and feminism, effectively erasing them within Western feminist dialogues and beyond, as the reach of Western feminist scholarship is far. Conjointly, when Western feminists place themselves at the center and cast Third World women into the periphery through inaccurate and ahistorical concepts, a universalized image of the typical Third World woman begins to arise. Mohanty relates:

This average Third World woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being ‘Third World’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions. (2003a, 22)

Feminist writings that contextualize women of the Third World as “other” also contribute to the conception that Third World women are victims of their circumstances, oppressed by religious or cultural traditions and burdened by the travails of family, work, and poverty. Ultimately, “commitments to a transnational and global feminism require that Western feminists refrain from buying into historically inaccurate and politically dangerous pictures of ‘Third-World traditions’” (Narayan 1997, x). Otherwise, Western feminists risk further alienating Third World women from the spheres of scholarship and the formation of knowledge. Part of this ignorance of tradition is tied to the fact that Third World women are rarely seen as agents within their situation. The goals many
Third World women work toward are fundamentally different from white, Western ideals of feminism. Feminists of all stripes should not be limited to issues within familiar contexts; rather, depth of analysis arises from challenging oneself to see beyond normative figurations.

**Universalized Notions of Womanhood**

The faceless, sexless, raceless proletariat. The faceless, raceless, classless category of “all women.” Both creations of white Western self-centeredness.

Adrienne Rich
Notes Toward a Politics of Location (1984)

Shortly after feminists of color and Third World feminists began to point out the hegemonic forces of Western feminism, the concept of a global sisterhood of women became disputed. Some feminist authors, such as Robin Morgan in her anthology Sisterhood is Global, conceive one unified international women’s movement based on women’s common condition under a universal “patriarchal mentality” (Morgan 1). This conceptualization of a united women’s front has been fustigated by Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty, as well as other feminist scholars, as “an approach [that embraces] the articulation of many voices to specify an inclusive feminism — calls for ‘global sisterhood’ are often premised on a center/periphery model where women of color or Third World women constitute the periphery” (Alexander xviii). This argument harkens back to the instance of othering in feminist theorizations of Third World women and their experiences, as well as the privileging of one type of feminism (Western) over alternate feminisms that may embody needs specific to its women (and men) participants.
Global sisterhood, also referenced in literature as universal sisterhood or international feminism, came under fire in Chandra Mohanty’s *Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience* (2003b) in which she posits an alternative conceptualization to Morgan’s global sisterhood. Mohanty calls this framework the “politics of experience.” Oppression is experienced differently by different women and varies according to the separate experiences, a view that influenced Mohanty’s derivation of Adrienne Rich’s politics of location. Mohanty’s politics of experience is grounded in historical, geographical, and cultural loci (2003b, 460) in which women’s experiential differences are accounted for and political agency is emphasized, a change from the ahistorical context within which global sisterhood functions. Mohanty disputes claims to a global sisterhood, stating that the assumption of women’s sameness is “predicated on the definition of the *experience of oppression* where difference can only be understood as male/female” (2003b, 463, emphasis in original). This assumption is problematic for a number of reasons.

First, recalling Derrida’s evaluation of binary opposites as superior/inferior, it becomes evident that placing men as purveyors of women’s oppression delineates the world into two classes: men, as agents of power, and women, as the powerless. Men belong to the dominant ideology in which women are “caught up in political webs not of our making which we are powerless to unravel” (Morgan 25). This dangerous dynamic limits space for women’s agency and theorizations of experience, thus stifling women’s ability to devise strategies to combat oppression. Second, the assumption that oppression is imparted by men onto women confuses all other categories of identity. Such an equation makes invisible experiences at the hand of such oppressive forces as racism,
classism, ageism, heterosexism, and so on. This creates a scenario in which experiences of oppression that do not correspond to the male/female standard cannot be recognized or scrutinized and are thus perpetuated. Third, the phenomenon of male oppression negates a historically situated understanding of women’s experiences. Mohanty explains:

> One of the tasks of feminist analysis is uncovering alternative, nonidentical histories which challenge and disrupt the spatial and temporal location of a hegemonic history. However, sometimes attempts to uncover and locate alternative histories code these very histories as either totally dependent on and determined by a dominant narrative, or as isolated and autonomous narratives untouched in their essence by the dominant figurations. In these rewritings, what is lost is the recognition that it is the very co-implication of histories with History [the dominant historical narrative] which helps us situate and understand oppositional agency. (2003b: 465-6)

Morgan’s *Global Sisterhood* fails to connect what Morgan calls “herstories,” or women’s narratives, to a broader network of historical narratives. Such a connection would weave women’s experiences of oppression into the larger scheme of history, thereby mapping intersections and uncovering a range of factors for women’s positions in the world instead of limiting women’s experiences of oppression to male hegemony.

Ultimately, the notion of global sisterhood is ineffective toward the greater goal of a transformed dominant ideology, whereby women are actors in history and in politics, and whereby articulations of the experiences of oppression are grounded in historical, geographical, and cultural loci. Strategies to combat oppression originate in a comprehensive understanding of difference. Reductively grouping women as an “already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires” (Mohanty 2003a, 21) blots out a multitude of separately defined identities and eliminates space for intersections into other endeavors, such as struggles against racism, classism,
heterosexism, and imperialism. These intersections are unrecognizable under global sisterhood due to its narrowly defined conception of oppression. The unity of all women is a lofty ideal, though one predicated on a positive notion of women working across boundaries, both real and imagined, toward common goal. That common goal, however, is a nonexistent standard. The unity of women, as Mohanty puts it so well, “is best understood not as … something that has to be worked for, struggled towards — in history” (2003b, 465).
CHAPTER II
Gendering Globalization

The conventional, gender-neutral representations and understandings of globalization and its processes must be reevaluated and reframed by placing gender at the center of the analysis. Cynthia Enloe embodies this attitude with her play on words using the second wave feminist motto, “the personal is political.” She explains:

“The international is personal” is a guide to making sense of NATO, the EEC and the IMF that insists on making women visible. If it is true that friendly as well as hostile relations between governments presuppose constructions of women as symbols, as providers of emotional support, as paid and unpaid workers, then it doesn’t make sense to continue analyzing international politics as if they were either gender-neutral or carried on only by men. (204)

The “international is personal” is particularly useful in developing a greater sense of the ways in which policies of free trade agreements and multilateral trade organizations such as the IMF and WTO impact women (and men) in their daily lives. Here, the “personal” identifies such phenomena as the “feminization of poverty” and the “feminization of labor” where women overwhelmingly pick up the slack in caretaking as social services are cut to meet loan criteria of multilateral trade organizations; where women take up low-paying, unskilled jobs as men move abroad in an effort to find better paying jobs; and where women move abroad to earn more, usually as caretakers of First World children when their own are several countries away.3 Day-to-day routines and customs are altered through economic policies that are enforced by “globalization from above” (Naples 2002, 7), or what migration anthropologist Sarah Mahler defines as

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“multinational corporations, media, commoditization … and other macro-level structures and processes that … are not produced and projected equally in all areas, but are controlled by powerful elites who seek, although do not necessarily find, political, economic and social dominance in the world” (qtd. in Naples 2002, 7). Additionally, multilateral trade organizations, home to elite economists and other makers of globalization policies, belong under the heading “globalization from above.” On the other hand, “globalization from below,” described by Mahler as “counter-hegemonic powers among nonelites” (qtd. in Naples 2002, 7), is present and prevalent in grassroots organizing, citizen protests, and other social movements. The women and women’s organizing groups affected by globalization from above must be made visible, as Enloe implies, in any analysis of the global economy.

The key to creating gender visibility within globalization is found in the formulation of globalization’s metanarrative. This ideology designates the market as the driving force behind the expansion of capital, an assertion that is constructed, but not necessarily a truth. In an essay that challenges traditional constructions of globalization and its main actors, Mona Danner and Gay Young write:

“[T]he market” is a social construction not a “natural” phenomenon, and the growth of global markets in the past two decades has been achieved largely by macro-economic policy makers’ interventions. … Until recently, economic globalization has succeeded as a “totalizing story” — a grand vision of inevitable and irresistible global market integration — and making alternative economic practices invisible. (86)

This sentiment is mirrored by Susan Bergeron. She writes, “By moving away from hegemonic thinking about the market as a natural and unstoppable force, we can begin to imagine more broadly the ways that women can play a role in shaping markets and
economies, a role beyond simply managing their already determined outcomes” (996-7). Through the deconstruction of traditional hegemonic structures in place, globalization can be reformed so as to take into account social and economic forces in everyday life, the same point Aihwa Ong emphasizes in her study of Asian immigrants: “Analyses of global economic restructuring should incorporate both ‘the economic rationalities of globalization and the cultural dynamics that shape human and political responses’” (qtd. in Naples 2002, 12). Chandra Mohanty adds an anti-capitalist spin to this discourse, arguing that “corporate capitalism has redefined citizens as consumers — and global markets replace the commitments to economic, sexual, and racial equality” (235) thereby furthering existing inequalities and divisions between men and women, rich and poor countries, First and Third World nations.

This chapter explores underlying principles of economic theory that are probable causes for gender disparity in economics and for the additional social burdens placed on women under globalization. An exploration of neoclassical economics, upon which the tenets of globalization are founded, exposes highly masculinist attitudes toward women’s work and women’s contributions to the economy. Moreover, a discussion of the gendered mechanisms of structural adjustment programs demonstrates ways in which globalization pressures and even counts on Third World women to take on extra, unpaid labor to compensate for cuts in social services. Ameliorating such unbalanced impacts of globalization requires transforming economic evaluations to account for and make space for women’s economic contributions to societies. A gender perspective informed by coherence between Western feminist theorizations of globalization and Third World and postcolonial feminist thought has the potential not only to lessen the degree of global
inequities, but also to transform the categories of gender, thereby correlatively transforming the (gendered) processes of globalization.

**Confounding the Masculinity of Neoclassical Economics**

Processes of globalization are driven by a particular set of ideological conclusions, many of which have proven ineffective as means toward a more prosperous world for all, rather than the upper echelon of First World, and some Third World, nations. That set of ideological conclusions is commonly referred to as neoclassical economics and poses a multitude of difficulties in its theoretical approach, none of which is perhaps more potent than its overuse and simplification of binaries and its general lack of regard for real human experiences — those that are amplified by social position, gender role, religious discrimination, and racial tension among other things. The failure of neoclassical economics — and its subsequent contribution to the processes of globalization — to take into account the type and variety of labor women contribute to economics has vast implications for the valuation of women and women’s work under globalization.

Feminist economists Edith Kuiper and Jolande Sap discuss these forces as “older hegemonic formations” and the role such formations have in reinforcing gender discrimination: “When women are seen as working for pin money their concentration in low-paying occupations can be seen as a result of their own choices. If, on the other hand, one recognizes the centrality of work and income in the lives of women this occupational crowding can be seen as a form of discrimination” (1995, 3). Furthermore, they argue that historically, economics has accepted the so-called sexual division of labor as biological truth and challenges regarding “sexual inequalities in the labor market or the
family were pushed to the margin by the conceptualization of sex roles as complementary and natural” (Kuiper 1995, 4). So long as women’s roles within the economy were seen in this way — as biologically given rather than socially constructed, hegemonic forces — economics was able to justify the invisible work of women (unpaid household labor, childcare, elder care) and the low wages women earned.

In the 1970s, however, with a rising consciousness of the inconsistencies between the valuation of women’s work and the quantity being performed, challenges to this form of masculinized economics began to appear. Economist Randy Albelda relates that the field moved away from such biologically determined arguments after taking heat from feminists’ accusations of sexism (Albelda 118). Nevertheless, it seems such logic is inherent to neoclassical formations of the rational individual:

At the most basic level, neoclassical reasoning claims that women’s inequality is freely and rationally chosen by women themselves. This conclusion stems from the model’s focus on individuals’ rational choice behavior, which largely ignores the different sets of constraints — that is, the dynamic set of historical and institutional settings — under which men and women operate. In this way neoclassical economic explanations of women’s unequal status serve to justify and preserve that status. (Albelda 112)

Furthermore, Albelda comments, “feminism has had little impact on economic thinking since the 1970s. Economics holds the distinction of being the most male-dominated discipline among the social sciences and the humanities in the United States” (4). As a woman who has been a part of the profession for more than two decades, she is perhaps well situated to offer such a hard-hitting criticism. Additionally, biases within the field are not improved by a less than agreeable view of women and women’s intellectual contributions:
The scientific practices of a dominant culture are what determine not only the limits of knowledge but who may legitimately participate in the language of science. … In everyday practices, outside of university environments, women are seen as particularly illiterate when it comes to having scientific knowledge or being able to discuss scientific issues with experts in the field. (Schutte in Narayan 2000, 49)

Within the field of economics, such distinct resistance to the incorporation of economic models attuned to societal discrimination is bound to have harmful fallout. Given the credibility and authority granted economists in the transnational policy-making sphere, their influence is pervasive, a potentially disruptive and disturbing observance for women no matter where they are located in the world.

**Structural Adjustment Programs**

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate the ways in which one mode of globalization — structural adjustment programs — tips the scales of economic processes in such a way as to disproportionately affect women. According to free trade ideology, unencumbered markets and comparative advantage (in which states remain competitive through the production of their comparatively most efficient good) are economic trump cards in which all participants in the global economy reap equal advantages and are able to trade freely and fairly. In the present environment of globalization, however, it is debatable as to what is free and fair. Structural adjustment programs (SAPs), originally applied in Latin American countries in the 1980s and enforced by the IMF, created undesirable human effects, many of which impacted women more heavily than men, in part due to social constructions of gender roles. Economists have customarily dealt with
figures and markets; but now, the global climate is in dire need of economists that also factor morality and life into their values on goods and labor.

The World Bank, officially the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) implement structural adjustment programs in indebted, developing countries to ensure repayment and economic restructuring of their economies. For the World Bank and the IMF, “the state is seen as part of the problem, not part of the solution” (Green 12) due to its interference in constructing trade barriers and manipulating prices through subsidizations and other policies. Thus, SAPs entail major objectives that are intended to “reduce the state’s role [in the economy] and unleash the private sector” (Green 12).

With the imposition of these policies, the sovereignty and ability of a nation’s government to control its own budget and social programs declines rapidly. The implementation of SAPs is far from a voluntary act on the part of a participating nation — rather, the IMF forcibly recommends the measures incorporated in SAPs. In his article “What I Learned at the World Economic Crisis,” Joseph Stiglitz, former World Bank Chief Economist, highlighted the irony of the assertive IMF agenda concerning SAPs:

In theory, the fund supports democratic institutions in the nations it assists. In practice, it undermines the democratic process by imposing policies. Officially, of course, the IMF doesn’t “impose” anything. It “negotiates” the conditions for receiving aid. But all the power in the negotiations is on one side — the IMF’s — and the fund rarely allows sufficient time for broad consensus-building or even widespread consultations with either parliaments or civil society. Sometimes the IMF dispenses with the pretense of openness altogether and negotiates secret covenants.

This imposition of policies rather than a negotiation of them results in lessened governmental sovereignty and forces indebted nations to follow the regulations dictated
by the IMF. Should a country not cooperate, it does not receive debt relief and becomes less attractive to foreign investors, which further exacerbates the nation’s struggling economy.\(^4\) Thus, indebted nations, at the mercy of the IMF, must agree to the measures of proposed SAPs.

A major tenet of the SAP model is reduced state spending. The budgets of countries with SAPs are approved by the IMF to ensure that debt payments are prioritized over other state expenditures — expenditures that sometimes cover education, healthcare, infrastructure, and environmental costs. Often, developing countries backpedal on advances as spending is cut to in these areas. Critics of the IMF and World Bank are outspoken about the failure of these multilateral trade organizations to reconcile their mission to foster sustainable economic growth with the consequences of SAPs: “In country after country, structural adjustment programs have reversed the development successes of the 1960s and 1970s, with ... millions sliding into poverty every year.”\(^5\)

While the country repays its debt, it is unable to enhance the standard of living for its population and promote internal development. Education has become a privilege in many countries, such as Nicaragua where only half of school age children attend school. Lack of funds for school materials or the need for the child’s labor in agricultural production often prevents gains in education and literacy. Governments are unable to enforce environmental laws effectively without sufficient funds. In many instances, it may even be undesirable for governments to uphold environmental laws for fear that multinational firms will be less interested if they must absorb additional costs for environmental

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protection measures: “Firms undeniably seek to increase profits and create a competitive advantage, and if moving to less expensive or less onerous locations would serve these aims, then it is only logical to expect them to do so” (Spar 563). A cut in state spending signifies a cut in social advances for the indebted nation.

The decrease in public expenditure often unevenly affects women, in part due to an underlying assumption that women will always be able to pick up the slack. “Structural adjustment programs and neoliberal policies promoted by national governments, whether consciously or unconsciously, assume that women will continue to expand their unpaid labor in the home and communities to compensate for the increase in poverty and loss of local resources” (Naples 2002, 11). This assumption is rooted in an ignorance of women’s work and what it constitutes — unpaid and unseen, it is easy to allow an increased load of labor for women to go unchallenged.

Unfortunately, the price women pay for this additional labor also goes unseen. In her article “When He Eats Little, She Eats Less,” globalization critic Noreena Hertz cites instances of inequity under these debt policies:

In order to meet this requirement [of cutting back on public expenditure], almost all developing countries have adopted a policy of charging for healthcare and school fees. And when parents faced with school fees have to choose between spending their money on sending their daughters or sons to learn, guess who gets to go to school? When the state doesn’t provide healthcare, it is daughters not sons who are taken out of school to become care-givers; it is girls who become the unpaid nurses.

Furthermore, when cash crops, many of which are inedible, are exported to foreign countries to increase foreign exchange, foodstuffs within the country become less available and more expensive due to diminished land for subsistence farming and for
food production. Food is still primarily a component of women’s work around the world. Thus, women eat less to feed their children and husbands more. Manisha Desai illustrates this point:

Even before SAPs, women did 70 percent of the world’s unpaid labor at home. Now women all over the world are engaged in providing more care for children, elderly parents, and other family members, in addition to their poorly paid work either in the formal or informal sector of the economy. Women thus bear additional emotional stress arising from the ‘belt-tightening’ demanded by economic restructuring. As the price of goods — especially food — has increased in all parts of the world, women have become even more vulnerable to malnutrition as they eat last after providing for their children and family members. (Desai in Naples 2002, 20-21).

In addition, more is spent on debt repayment than healthcare in nations where AIDS and high infant mortality rates are prevalent. While the country may be repaying debt, it is no longer encouraging social growth by way of literacy and health within its borders.

Another significant tenet of SAPs is the development of free market economies in indebted countries. The IMF and World Bank pressure nations to eliminate all barriers to allow for a free flow of goods, which would allow for foreign competition and the stimulation of trade. In spite of this, a free market economy can create economic disadvantages, such as food insecurity and worker exploitation.

Free markets aid in the attraction of multinational firms which set up shop and provide employment for the citizens of an indebted nation. Nonetheless, more jobs do not imply good jobs. In an effort to appease these enterprises, nations “race to the regulatory bottom” by not enforcing labor laws and discouraging the formation of labor unions. The multinational firms attracted by developments in free trade have effectively turned back the clock on labor conditions; they are now similar to those from America’s early
industrialization era (Spar 560). Additionally, environmental destruction can have significant consequences for women. Again, Manisha Desai explains,

> Whether it is the destruction of the rainforest in Latin America, the felling of trees in the Himalayan Mountains in India, desertification in Africa, or toxic dumping in the United States, the environmental desecration caused by global economic policies have led to increasing material and cultural hardships for women (Mies and Shiva, 1993). For women in the Third World, destruction of the environment means that women have to spend more time every day to gather wood for fuel, fodder for cattle, and fetch drinking water. (Desai in Naples 2002, 24).

These consequences of environmental destruction, as Desai points out, are not limited to developing nations — women of the First World must also deal with hardships, though different from those experienced by women of the Third World, which arise from improper and unhealthy environmental practices.

The IMF and World Bank have been criticized as being overly generous toward international corporations at the expense of people living in poverty. Although seemingly well intentioned in the aim to implement structural adjustment programs, the multilateral trade organizations enforcing the regulations must attune themselves to the dissent and dissatisfaction their policies are generating in both developing and developed nations. The model of structural adjustment programs is in urgent need of major reformation, most of which must originate within the multilateral trade organizations themselves.

**Transformative Globalization Discourse**

If economics is indeed as resistant to transformation as the above analyses suggest, then it is imperative for those who recognize its gaping inadequacies, inconsistencies, and
dangerous dichotomic interpretations to reflect on V. Spike Peterson’s proposal for the integration of gender within any already constituted institution, such as economics:

One consequence, which feminist studies repeatedly confirm, is that females cannot simply be added to categories that are defined by maleness (which implies the absence of femaleness). To do so exposes the (masculine) gender of the category (for example, the assumption of male experience in constructions of the public, political identity and politics *per se*). Females cannot be added (they are marginalized), must be ‘like men’ (they are masculinized) or they are included, which includes femaleness, and the meaning of the category is transformed. (Kofman 109, emphasis in original)

Thus, in order to achieve recognition within institutions and particular academic disciplines, Peterson relates that it is indispensable to eliminate the “add women and stir” approach typified in popular gender mainstreaming policies of the 1980s and 1990s.

Within institutions in which gender mainstreaming occurred, such as the UN and United States Agency for International Development (USAID), gender concerns were still inadequately addressed, were often met with skepticism, and were sometimes merely tacked onto other initiatives, rather than taken as crucial political imperatives. Aruna Rao and David Kelleher — co-founders of Gender at Work, a partnership that self-purports to empower women and promote gender equality through institutional change — explain the limitations of both gender mainstreaming and its implementation process:

Gender mainstreaming has been implemented in an organisational context of hierarchy and agenda-setting that has not prioritized women’s rights. It has focused overwhelmingly on promoting women’s perceived “basic needs,” and not on meeting the strategic concerns of women themselves in terms of supporting them to give voice to their interest, or to mobilise and change unequal gender power relations. Finally, in some cases, gender mainstreaming has got [sic] lost in traditional organisational development concerns, with inadequate
analysis of the issues, context and power dynamics — both internal and external — that are perpetuating women’s disempowerment. (Kerr 144-5)

Likewise, David Hirschmann recalls the treatment of gender issues throughout his experience as a consultant to donor agencies: “Gender analysis is not taken as a serious conceptual framework, especially … by economists. In the current environment, where foreign assistance is specifically tied to economic policy goals, this is bad news for those who want to support programs that have a substantial impact on women’s livelihoods and choices” (Jaquette 84).

Given these circumstances, Peterson’s insistence on a message of transformation becomes even more vital within a discourse of gender parity, particularly because of the failure of gender mainstreaming to address the most pertinent issues affecting women across the globe. Feminists, organizers, and activists must conceive of ways to transform the landscape of economics and processes of globalization in order to truly affect change. History has already demonstrated that integration is not sufficient — transformation is the key to elevating gender discourse within globalization.
CHAPTER III

Transnational Feminist Organizing

In the last chapter, it became evident the extent to which women of the world bear additional costs — in labor and health, among other things — under globalization policies, like structural adjustment programs. It also became evident that simply adding women into already established, dominant institutions is insufficient to bring forth adequate change. Instead, taking into account V. Spike Peterson’s observation, these institutions and the manner in which policy decisions are made must be transformed from the outside in. Developing effective strategies to initiate such transformation is one of the most perplexing and pressing struggles facing feminists and activists. This chapter teases apart the challenges and inconsistencies experienced in previous efforts toward transformation. It concludes with the argument that several critical elements must be implemented in transnational organizing strategies in order to lobby equitably and respectfully for gender integration in global policies.

While there are multiple variations and objectives to feminist organizing strategies and practices, the viewpoints considered here are predominantly reactions to the processes involved with development and globalization. While globalization is a colossal global process with many “winners” and powerful elites running the show, it also, in the view of many theorists, provides ample sites for change and resistance. Myra Marx Ferree describes this occurrence as follows:

Despite the typical assumption that globalization is a massive force bearing down on helpless populations, to look at the actual process is to see a great variety of social actors — including many who are not educational or political elites — engaging in diverse types of integrative work. Social movements of many kinds are finding a voice,
alongside more privileged actors such as states and corporations. (4)

The social actors Ferree refers to may be nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), indigenous movements (such as the Zapatistas in southern Chiapas, Mexico), or even international institutions such as the UN. In a similar fashion, feminist sociologist Valentine Moghadam comments: “We can identify at least one positive aspect of globalization — the proliferation of women’s movements at the local level, the emergence of transnational feminist networks working at the global level, and the adoption of international conventions” (19). It is these first two elements that are the core concentration of this chapter.

The causes for the “proliferation” and “emergence” of women’s movements and feminist networks that Moghadam observes are linked to a technology surge that coincided, in many ways, with the upswing in free trade policies in the early and mid-1990s. It is certainly true that globalization surfaced on a wave of technology — e-mail communication, Internet access, online communities, and minutes-old news updates — that contributes to increased connectivity between social movements, particularly those that operate across national borders. Instantaneous communication has extended the abilities of transnational organizations to interact with their constituents and respond to crises and setbacks quickly and efficiently. Furthermore, the dissemination of information has expanded the audience and potential donor network of such organizations. Nevertheless, some technological capabilities are still scarce, expensive, or hard to come by in many locations that lack adequate infrastructure, particularly in rural areas of the

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world. This includes both Third and First World nations, for poverty and the unavailability of amenities such as the Internet are not limited to so-called developing nations. In the end, however, technology has undoubtedly advanced the number and viability of local and global organizing networks.

On another note, identity politics play a crucial role in transnational feminist organizing. Negotiations of identity politics in transnational organizing reflect similar conversations that revolve around the shortcomings of past Western feminist discourse on Third World feminisms and activism. Some of these discussions were highlighted in chapter one, namely the limitations of conceptualizing an “average” Third World woman and a global sisterhood of women. The first conceptualization falls short of identifying Third World women as subjects with agency and legitimate knowledge, but posits through an implicit juxtaposition that Western women possess control over their lives that Third World women supposedly lack. The second conceptualization, Robin Morgan’s notion of global sisterhood, inaccurately assumes that women share a common oppression under a universal “patriarchal mentality” (Morgan 1; see p. 14). Western feminist theorizations have been pushed to overcome barriers of race, class, ethnicity, location, etc. and to bridge the gap between the objectives of Western and non-Western women’s groups. It is now becoming more widely recognized among feminists and activists that it is impossible to organize effectively if the strategy relies solely on the assumption that all women have common interests. As Betty Wells correctly notes, “differences among women negate effective organizing based on gender alone” (Naples 2002, 146). However, “identity politics and the construction of group identities remain an important political resource for social change” (Naples 2002, 146) because they serve as
the building blocks for a shared worldview that in turn informs joint action and participation in organizing tactics.

The reasons for which women’s movements and transnational feminist networks arise are multiple and varied and come out of ceaseless discussions and epiphanies. The following sections explore the theoretical concepts of gender interests (practical-strategic), forms of women’s movements (feminine-feminist), and the significance each of these dichotomies bear in discussions of women’s organizing and transnational support.

**Dichotomous Discourses**

Many authors within this literature make a distinction between supposed types of women’s movements — one type being feminine, the other feminist — a categorization that often simplifies the varied and real concerns that have motivated participants to organize. To many feminist theorists, these categories implicitly designate a hierarchy premised on qualities presumed to characterize either a feminine or a feminist movement. According to some theorists, like Marianne Marchand (1995, 61), Maxine Molyneux’s differentiation between practical and strategic gender interests also weighs heavily in the conversation centered on what constitutes feminine versus feminist movements. To others, however, Molyneux’s theory of gender interests is recognition of the range of concerns women — as well as men, as Molyneux points out — have and sometimes organize to address. Digging deeper into literature dealing with such distinctions, it becomes more and more apparent that, despite the inherent flaws of binary pairs, there is some merit to the act of naming and identifying women’s movements. Still, the distinctiveness between feminine and feminist movements is more fluid than fixed, and
practical gender interests sometimes transmute to become strategic gender interests. This section explores practical-strategic gender interests and feminine-feminist movements so as to develop a framework for situating the subject of the next section, which delves into challenges such movements face in transnational cooperation.

**Practical-Strategic Gender Interests**

At this juncture, it is helpful to expand upon and explain the theory of practical-strategic interests that first arose from Maxine Molyneux’s seminal article “Mobilization without Emancipation? Women’s Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua.” Initially published in 1985, Molyneux examines if and how Nicaraguan women’s specific interests were integrated into the Sandinista agenda after the revolution — in which women and their identities played a crucial role — and how to define those interests.

Molyneux points to the extent to which women’s traditional identities — particularly as mothers — were used by the revolution to inform their political roles:

“[R]epresentations of women acquired new connotations, ones that *politicised* the social roles with which women are conventionally associated, but did not dissolve them.” (39)

Molyneux argues that, due to this use of conventional women’s roles in revolutionary rhetoric, women’s identities were not dissolved; rather, “the subordination of [women’s] specific interests to the broader goals of [the Sandinistas]” (40) was required. It is this forfeiture of women’s interests that Molyneux questions: “[I]f women surrender their specific interests in the universal struggle for a different society, at what point are these interests rehabilitated, legitimated and responded to by the revolutionary forces or by the new socialist state?” (40). In order to resolve these postulations, Molyneux sets forth a
theory that attempts to demarcate gender interests so as to more readily identify Sandinista policies that address those interests.

Practical gender interests are typified by the availability of resources needed for daily acts of livelihood. Molyneux states that practical interests are “a response to an immediate perceived need, and they do not generally entail a strategic goal such as women’s emancipation or gender equality” (44), although she does note that practical gender interests “arise directly out of [prevailing forms of gender subordination]” (44). Class effects and economic necessity clearly factor into practical gender interests since those interests develop from conditions in which there is lack of affordable food, clean water, accessible health care, or other basic needs that would be felt the most by poorer women.

In contrast, strategic gender interests are “derived … from the analysis of women’s subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory, set of arrangements to those which exist” (43). Molyneux points out the need to designate particular objectives (strategic gender interests) to achieve in order to eliminate women’s subordination. Such objectives include:

the abolition of the sexual division of labor, the alleviation of the burden of domestic labor and childcare, the removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination, the attainment of political equality, the establishment of freedom of choice over childbearing and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women. (43)

Also, Molyneux clarifies strategic interests in an article written almost two decades after the initial publication of her interest model. “‘Strategic’ interests [are] those involving claims to transform social relations in order to enhance women’s position and to secure a more lasting repositioning of women within the gender order and within society at large”
(Molyneux 153). Strategic gender interests cover broader, foundational oppressions and require more overarching forms of democracy, through NGOs, civic action, and international support in some cases. They also constitute exceptionally feminist goals, goals that any proclaimed feminist organization is likely to support and strive to achieve.

Attentiveness and delicacy is absolutely necessary in attempting to formulate gender interests so as to avoid treading back into the muddy waters of feminist essentialism. Gender interests make it easy to evoke nuances of global sisterhood by assuming that all women are bound by certain common interests and by embracing the notion that women’s oppression is homogenous rather than recognizing it as “being multicausal in origin and mediated through a variety of different structures, mechanisms and practices, which may vary considerably across space and time” (Molyneux 42). Moreover, Molyneux indicates numerous dynamics within women’s lives that complicate the concept of universalized women’s interests. In her own words:

Because women are positioned within their societies through a variety of different means — among them, class, ethnicity and gender — the interests they have as a group are similarly shaped in complex, and sometimes conflicting, ways. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to generalise about the “interests of women.” Instead, we need to specify how the various categories of women might be affected differently and act differently on account of the particularities of their social positioning and their chosen identities. (43)

Nevertheless, Molyneux ascertains that women may have some shared “general interests” that she sets apart as “gender interests” in order to “differentiate them from the false homogeneity imposed by the notion of women’s interests” (43). It is these so-called gender interests — practical and strategic — that have remained controversial within feminist discourse on women’s movements and feminist organizing.
Multiple critiques have been made of Molyneux’s theory of practical-strategic gender interests. The most salient of these and the reason for which practical-strategic gender interests most often come under scrutiny, is an argument rooted in Derridean philosophy that states the practical/strategic binary implies a hierarchy of interests. Within this hierarchy, strategic interests — those most often deemed feminist — are privileged. This is due to the assumption that they are more significant and more sophisticated in their aim than practical gender interests, which are often relegated to the private sphere of analysis.

V. Spike Peterson and Anne Runyan relate the structure of this argument:

The distinction between practical and strategic gender interests has been criticized by postcolonial feminists who argue that they tend to reproduce hierarchical dualisms that divide the personal from the political, the private from the public, and feminine from feminist consciousness, while also privileging the latter in each dyad. (178)

In this line of thinking, practical gender interests — those that address material concerns — are categorized as “personal,” “private” (meaning within the private sphere), and “feminine.”

TABLE 1.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practical Gender Interests</th>
<th>Strategic Gender Interests</th>
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<tr>
<td>immediate perceived need</td>
<td>addresses women’s subordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private — apolitical Local Feminine</td>
<td>Public — political Global Feminist</td>
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While it may be true that the practical-strategic gender interests model implicitly constructs the latter as more critical, and thereby more worthy of women’s energy and time, it is also true that addressing practical gender interests is absolutely essential, not
only for the health and well-being of effected persons, but also for informing political consciousness. The differentiation between practical and strategic gender interests is often more ambiguous than a hierarchy of interests suggests. “[H]ow and why certain women become aware of the relations of domination that shape their lives and subsequently form a commitment to fight injustice and inequality” (Naples 1998, 332) is frequently motivated by the realization that practical gender interests are closely tied to issues that compose strategic gender interests. Peterson and Runyan highlight the fluidity of these concepts:

When women participate in political movements as a result of their practical gender interests, they may develop an awareness of their strategic gender interests by self-consciously confronting their subordination as women. … That is, practical gender interests are often not being satisfied because strategic gender interests are being thwarted. With this insight, women are able to link systemic gender inequalities and the more immediate problems … they face in everyday life. (177-8).

In this way, connections between practical and strategic gender interests lead to the source of women’s subordination, whether it is state policies, religious edicts, or other institutionalized forms of gender discrimination.

Some feminist theorists balk at the relationship between practical and strategic gender interests, even when such a relationship makes associations between one specific concern and the actions that precipitated it. Sarah Radcliffe and Sallie Westwood object to the practical-strategic distinction in part for the following reasoning:

It suggests that there is a simple dichotomy between “practical” and “strategic” gender interests which can be aligned with notions of the public and the private as spheres of interest for women; this, as we suggest, may be helpful for organizing commonsense but does not provide a theoretical base for understanding women as political
subjects and actors. We would also want to suggest that it, too, has a universalizing quality which is located with a linear view of progress founded upon the post-Enlightenment account of movement towards a goal as part of a grand narrative of rational progress towards a better world. … Such meta-narrative suggests a hierarchical relationship between practical and strategic gender interests such that women, in order to progress, must move from one to the other. (qtd. in Marchand 1995, 62)

There are several arguments here that must be dissected.

First, Radcliffe and Westwood miss a fundamental point in regard to “understanding women as political subjects and actors.” It is unclear what would constitute a “theoretical base” for such understanding, but it seems counter-productive to take to task women’s mobilizations, regardless of whether they are motivated by so-called practical or strategic gender interests, for lacking the basis for understanding women as political agents. Revisiting the second wave feminist motto “the personal is political,” it seems misguided to assume that practical gender interests, which Radcliffe and Westwood align with the private sphere, do not have any political bearing on a woman’s life or on her decision to organize with others to combat a “practical” issue. Is it that Radcliffe and Westwood view the private sphere as being a place devoid of politicization, or is it that they view practical gender interests as non-political? The same goes for strategic gender interests and its coupling with the public sphere. (See Table 1.)

Perhaps this confusion arises from Radcliffe and Westwood’s assessment of what comprises practical and strategic gender interests. They assume that practical gender interests are relegated to the private sphere and that strategic gender interests are carried out in the public sphere. Under the column of private and public are other binary associations that Radcliffe and Westwood do not hesitate to affiliate with practical and
strategic interests. These include, as demonstrated in Table 1 above, local/global, feminine/feminist, apolitical/political. Radcliffe and Westwood construe gender interests in this manner. It is not necessarily true one way or the other that practical gender interests are inherently apolitical or feminine or that strategic gender interests are always global. Indeed, when actualized, gender interests are always political in nature.

Second, Radcliffe and Westwood define the gender interests model as a linear progression toward a goal, which denotes a hierarchy in movement where women must move forward from practical to strategic gender interests in order to “progress” (read: become enlightened, as if they are not already). Undoubtedly, this is a hierarchal evaluation of practical and strategic gender interests but it is also inaccurate. One thing must be clear: Practical gender interests are no less important that strategic gender interests and vice versa. Strategic gender interests may be realized in the process of organizing around an issue that would be considered a practical gender interest, but achieving successes with regard to “practical” issues is as much a goal to women’s movements and feminist organizing as achieving successes that are “strategic.”

The fluidity of the practical-strategic should become evident, then, with the recognition that both are integral aspects that must be confronted within any successful movement. Peterson and Runyan help elucidate the interconnections between “practical” and “strategic” movements:

[M]ovements arising out of women’s practical gender issues should not be viewed as constituting only reformist politics, any more than movements arising out of strategic gender interests should be viewed as always constituting transformative politics. … Moreover, we must remember that both reformist and transformative politics are necessary — not only to ameliorate the oppressive
conditions under which most women live but also (eventually) to eliminate these conditions altogether. (178)

Moreover, Molyneux comments on the potential of practical interests to achieve transformative politics. “With regard to the uses made of the strategic/practical distinction in planning contexts, the problem is that it has apparently been deployed in the form of a too rigid binary, with practical interest set against strategic in a static, hierarchised opposition. … Clearly, practical interests can, at times should, be the basis for a political transformation” (155). Thus, tackling the source (strategic) of practical interests is essential, but so too is achieving victories that puncture the status quo (practical).

While the interest model is, in a way, a progression, it is not fundamentally hierarchical. Step back for a moment and envision the practical-strategic gender interest model as a linear continuum of concerns that women face in their daily lives, rather than as a vertical hierarchy in which one type of concern is placed above another. On this continuum, practical gender interests constantly inform strategic interests and vice versa. In this scenario, one is not privileged over the other; rather, without one, the other suffers deeply. Strategic interests may have more widespread concern, but practical interests lay the groundwork for achieving a strategic objective.

While Molyneux engages gender interests in order to consider how they were met by the socialist Sandinista government of Nicaragua, she also provides a framework for feminist organizing and activism in the age of globalization. Reflecting more recently (2003) on gender interests, Molyneux emphasizes that her “original discussion of women’s interests was within a work of political sociology” (153) and that later adaptations were detached from this “explanatory context” (153). She is wary of some
ways in which the “questions of interest” (153) are being deployed in the arenas of development and gender policy. “The issue is one of the role they are designated in the planning process and by whom, and what relationship is established between the planning agency and the population with which it aims to work. This is as much an issue of good practice as of good theory” (153). Molyneux does not deny the place of the interest model within these contexts; rather, she cautions against using it as a cure all, as a “mechanical prescription for women’s organisations to follow” (153). Writing in the middle of the 1980s, Molyneux perhaps did not foresee her work within the contours of a globalized economy. Her ability to comment now on the derivations of the interest model should provide a refreshed outlook on the manner in which practical and strategic gender interests may contribute to feminist organizing strategies.

Feminine-Feminist Movements

What is a movement, exactly, and what constitutes a women’s movement? Maxine Molyneux broaches these complex questions in her article “Analysing Women’s Movements,”7 in which she explains:

To speak of a movement … implies a social or political phenomenon of some significance, that significance being given both by its numerical strength but also by its capacity to effect change in some way or another, whether this is expressed in legal, cultural, social or political terms. A women’s movement does not have to have a single organisational expression, and may be characterised by a diversity of interests, forms of expression and spatial location. Logically, it comprises a substantial majority of women, where it is not exclusively made up of women. (Molyneux 144)

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7 This article was first published as an article in Development and Change, vol. 29, no. 2 (1998).
It is with this logic, then, that the use of “women’s movements” will denote both feminine and feminist movements. Both are mainly comprised of women and have multiple goals and strategies to achieve those goals. Nevertheless, categorically speaking, feminine movements and feminist movements are distinguished by certain aspects of their organization, a discerning beginning point for an examination of feminist organizing strategies and practices.

According to Myra Marx Ferree, a feminine movement organizes “women explicitly as women to make social change” (6). A feminine movement “constructs women as a distinctive interest group, even when it may define the interests that this group shares as diverse and not necessarily centered on gender” (6). Furthermore, Ferree explains: “This definition of ‘[feminine] movement’ explicitly recognizes that many mobilizations of women as women start out with a non-gender-directed goal, such as peace, antiracism, or social justice, and only later develop an interest in changing gender relations” (6).

Alternatively, feminist movements are defined for Ferree by “Activism for the purpose of challenging and changing women’s subordination to men … Feminism is a goal, a target for social change, a purpose informing activism, not a constituency or a strategy” (6). Anyone, Ferree points out, can participate in feminist activism, whereas a feminine movement is by women (though not necessarily for women). Ferree’s distinction between feminine and feminist movements clarifies by whom and for whom movements are created. Sonia Alvarez further reinforces Ferree’s statements:

Whereas feminist organizations focus on issues specific to the female condition (i.e. reproductive rights), feminine groups mobilize women around gender-related issues and concerns. The cost of living, for example, is one such issue. The sexual division of labour in most societies holds women responsible for managing family budgets and
allocating family incomes to provide for basic necessities. Women, then, may organize to protest the rising cost of living because inflation undermines their ability to adequately feed, clothe, or house their families. (qtd. in Marchand 1995, 61)

Alvarez uses the cost of living as an example of an issue around which feminine movements would rally. Recall Maxine Molyneux’s model of gender interests — the cost of living is best understood as a practical gender interest, as a daily concern for women (and men) that would motivate women to organize for change.

It is too easy to correlate, as Marchand did in her article “Latin American Women Speak on Development” (Marchand 1995, 56-72), the proximity between practical gender interests, which are “based on the satisfaction of needs arising from women’s placement within the sexual division of labour” (Molyneux 153), and feminine movements and their typically “non-gender-directed” goals. Likewise, strategic gender interests, which address “strategic objectives to overcome women’s subordination” (Molyneux 43), are often tied to feminist movements, which exhibit overtly feminist goals of equality and social reform. Marchand goes so far as to tap Molyneux as one of the first theorists to bring forth a differentiation in types of movements (1995, 61).

It seems Molyneux may have a different perspective given some of her more recent writing in which she notes that criteria for women’s movements premised upon the pursuit of women’s gender interests and “defined by their autonomy from control by other social groups” (Molyneux 145) fail to encompass other forms of women’s political agency that fall outside these constructed conditions for women’s movements. She writes that while women’s movements that comply with the above criteria “have been
significant in the development of feminism, they have not been the only kind, or even sometimes the most important kind” (145). She continues:

Moreover, general treatments of women’s movements have tended to exclude consideration of right wing mobilisations of women … Are fascist mobilisations of women, or Islamist women’s movements, not women’s movements in any sense? … These are usually excluded from being considered women’s movements on grounds of autonomy, if not on grounds of interest. Yet they deserve consideration in order to evaluate their significance both as political phenomena and for what they signify for their participants. (145)

It is important to note that the feminine-feminist dichotomy deployed to characterize women’s movements falls short of implicating all forms of women’s political agency. Moreover, it cannot be said that the model of gender interests posited by Molyneux in 1985 brought forth the dichotomization of women’s movements within Western feminist discourse. If nothing else, the model of gender interests was conveniently used by others to label the goals of feminine and feminist movements. The original intentions of identifying practical-strategic gender interests were, in Molyneux’s own words, “misunderstood or lost in translation” (153).

What use, then, is the feminine-feminist distinction of women’s movements to feminist dialogue if the dichotomy fails to elucidate women’s organizing in concrete ways? While it may be a rhetorical construct of Western theorists, Marianne Marchand argues that the dichotomy is a “source of empowerment” (1995, 63) for Latin American working-class women who function within a culture that has definitive gender roles and is suspicious of feminist objectives. She explains:

Within societies where machismo and its counterpart marianismo have (until recently) generated clearly defined expectations about gender roles, women may need to
justify their action(s) as an extension of their duties and roles as women. In this way they create their space within the public sphere, while denying the feminist and political nature of their activities (Navarro 1989; Pires de Rio Caldeira 1990). A straightforward statement about women’s “feminist” actions could easily arouse male opposition as well as women’s anxiety about bridging socially ascribed gender roles. The eradication of the feminist-feminine dichotomy might, under certain circumstances, lead to a different form of neo-colonial discourse, denying local women the possibility to create their own political and discursive space. The difference between the discursive imposition of a feminist-feminine dichotomy and local women’s interpretations of this dichotomy resides with the issues of empowerment and representation. In the latter case, local women have a voice in their own representation, and can use the dichotomy for their own empowerment. (1995, 63-4)

Given this set of circumstances, the feminine-feminist dichotomy creates alternative notions of women’s political agency that are less disruptive within some cultural and historical contexts and provides a means of affecting change that may not otherwise be present — at least not without some antagonism or misgiving from other sources within society.

While the feminine-feminist dichotomy of women’s movements may eliminate space for other women’s political activism as Maxine Molyneux noted, it does present expanded options for some women who participate in movements, whatever the goal of the movement may be. Beyond the dichotomy, women’s movements in themselves serve women in a number of ways, when not only a goal is achieved or an issue addressed, but also in the process of political action. Myra Marx Ferree elucidates this point best:

Regardless of their goals, mobilizations that use gender to mobilize women are likely to bring their constituents into more explicitly political activities, empower women to challenge limitations on their roles and lives, and create networks among women that enhance their ability to
recognize existing gender relations as oppressive and in need of change. (7)

Thus, the creation and existence of a women’s movement may be the impetus for women to critically evaluate their social location and begin to deconstruct other social factors that impact numerous aspects of their lives.

**Negotiating the Politics of Transnational Support**

As the last sections demonstrated, complex issues arise out of conceptualizations of women’s movements and the motivations for organizing around concerns that have gendered underpinnings. This section will operate within the frameworks already established, taking practical and strategic gender interests as a fluid continuum and using women’s movements to refer to the politicalization of gendered concerns. Women’s movements may operate across multiple terrains — geographic, cultural, and political — thereby complicating aspects of cooperation, communication, action, and access to resources. Women’s movements that operate in this way, particularly those that function across physical boundaries of geography, will be referred to herein as transnational feminist networks.

Manisha Desai comments on the formation of transnational feminist networks, indicating, “the flow of ideas and activism is no longer unidirectional, from the North to the South, but multidirectional. The ideas and activism are dispersed into varied local sites where they are picked up and refashioned as they resonate in contextualized ways” (Naples 2002, 15). Transnational feminist networks vary in their form and make-up. The network may be composed of a number of women’s movements across the globe or it may be a partnership or coalition between just two entities. In fact, those entities are not
necessarily women’s movements, though they do work toward a goal defined by gender implications or a constituency of women.

Transnational feminist networks face a number of challenges in working and organizing across both real and metaphorical borders, especially when those borders are between Third World nations and nations of the wealthier and politically more powerful First World. Power must constantly be negotiated in these circumstances to ensure that hierarchical relations are not replicated within the network itself. Aili Mari Tripp describes how much needed transnational support is not always given in the most helpful context:

> [O]ne of the major challenges to strengthening international cooperation is the way movements, particularly in the North, identify with and support women’s movements in parts of the world other than their own. When international support is extended, it is not always offered in ways that reflect an understanding of other women’s movement, their local context, and their needs. (Ferree 296)

The negotiations of power and privilege within transnational feminist networks echo many of the same complexities faced in Western feminist theorizations of Third World women that were discussed and explained in the first chapter. As Manisha Desai points out, these networks “often reproduce existing inequalities” (Naples 2002, 31) as the more privileged women of the First World and some educated women from the Third World are the dominant players in transnational organizations. According to examples Tripp provides, positively intentioned transnational feminist networking can backfire to produce radically divergent results from the intended constructive feminist outcome.

One such example describes how an international petition campaign for the release of Amina Lawal Kurami, a woman sentenced to death by stoning in March 2002 under
Islamic sharia laws in northern Nigeria, produced inaccurate, sometimes racist, letters that undermined and illegitimated local activists’ efforts. It was assumed that the local activists had provided the false information. Additionally, Tripp explains that the “international activists who presented Islam and Africa as barbaric and savage in their petition campaigns” (Ferree 299) not only perpetuated racism, but also strengthened the claims of Islamic political religious extremists. This and other examples provide a strong impetus for transnational feminist networks to develop and cultivate awareness and sensitivity toward preconceived notions of identity and also toward universalizing attitudes.

Commenting on transnational organizing strategies in the context of women’s rights under sharia law in Nigeria, Ayesha Iman writes that a respectful, informed network must ask several questions of itself and its proposed actions. In her own words:

Would a particular response make things better or worse? For which individuals or groups of people? How? Would another sort of response be more effective? Is what is being requested feasible and legal? What sort of language would be most appropriate? Are the facts presented accurate? Is there enough information that the specifics are not lost in overgeneralization?

Informed and respectful solidarity also means finding out about the groups involved at national and local levels. This is particularly the case when there may be more than one group (of locals or internationals), advocating different things. Who are the groups? What are their past histories? What constituencies do they work with or represent? … Why are they asking for a given kind of strategy or support? … Respectful solidarity further requires recognizing that while neither locals nor internationals can automatically be assumed to have a monopoly on the best analysis or the most effective strategy, it is locals who have to live with the consequences of any wrong or mistaken decisions. (qtd in Ferree 307)
The most significant observation Iman makes is that, as demonstrated by the above example of international petition campaigns, it is locals who must deal with any aftereffects, good or bad. This is one reason why local actors and those on the ground must be treated with respect and must be incorporated into the decision-making process. Nevertheless, as Iman calls attention to, that is not necessarily to say that local actors have all the answers or the best advice; but they may have indispensable insights into mediating the cultural and political terrain of the organizing site.

Obviously, transnational feminist networks must negotiate the boundaries of identity, culture, politics, and a myriad of other factors to bring forth a successful model of feminist organizing across geographical locations. The questions Iman posits above point to problems that have been encountered by transnational feminist networks in the past. A number of those will be examined here, specifically the so-called “rescue paradigm,” consideration of local actors’ knowledge, and uneven access to resources, particularly monetary resources.

Some transnational feminist actors fall into a rescue paradigm that, according to Aili Mari Tripp, “seems to legitimate ignoring local actors altogether by stressing their neediness and backwardness” (Ferree 302). Some examples of feminist discourses of rescuing other women are female genital cutting in Africa or the oppression of the veil in the Middle East. Yet such discourses fail to ground these practices in cultural, political, religious contexts and thus essentialize and differentiate “them” from “us.” Tripp describes how such differentiation constructs notions of dominance:

Why is there an intense focus on the 15 women who die every year in Jordan as a result of honor killings when more than 3,000 women in the United States (about one-third of all women murdered) also die of domestic
violence? Widening the gulf between “us” and “them” may make “us” feel powerful and even lead us to open our checkbooks to help a relatively few dramatically victimized women, but the more pressing needs of the majority of women fall into oblivion. (Ferree 308).

Similarly, feminist anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod describes how such dominance and feelings of helpfulness would seem prejudiced and out of place if conferred on a more familiar population:

All one needs to do to appreciate the patronizing quality of the rhetoric of saving women is to imagine using it today in the United States about disadvantaged groups such as African American women or working-class women. We now understand them as suffering from structural violence. We have become politicized about race and class, but not culture. (789)

The rescue paradigm occurs when feminists (and others) who invoke such rhetoric fail to ground their analyses of women’s positions in the appropriate cultural context. While genital cutting is by no means a safe or healthy procedure, employing an ethnocentric attitude in which “the overall effect is one of denigration rather than empowerment” (Salem Mekuria qtd. in Ferree 303) serves to reproduce metanarratives that are frighteningly similar to some colonial discourses that invoked instances of women’s oppression to justify colonial rule. Some such instances included child marriage and sati (a practice in which a widow sacrifices herself on her husband’s funeral pyre), while more recently, the oppression of women under Taliban rule was used to enlist support of U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod 2002). The war in Afghanistan instead brought devastation, hunger, and a new Islamic fundamentalist
regime to power. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak revealingly calls such rescue rhetoric “white men saving brown women from brown men.”

Tripp points out that there is a lot of danger in characterizing women of the Third World as being in need of rescue. Not only does it insinuate that Third World women are “steeped in oppressive cultures” and that First World women exist “above culture and without oppression,” it also leads to “an inability to see local feminists as active, intelligent, competent partners” in First World women’s organizing endeavors (Ferree 303). Such an inability to recognize the resourcefulness of local actors has implications for the overall productiveness of the feminist endeavor. Tripp expands:

Sometimes outsiders do not feel the need to consult with local actors about their facts or strategies because they believe they are providing an unquestionable “good” in taking action on behalf of another group of people. They are so focused on mobilizing and getting their constituents and the broader public to feel good about their involvement that they fail to notice the potential damage that their activism can cause, especially in cases of insufficient collaboration with those on the ground who are the most knowledgeable about their own circumstances. (Ferree 297).

This explanation again recognizes that no matter what policies or strategies are taken, it is the local activists and people that will live with the consequences. Transnational feminist networks must maintain a critical approach in extending support and mobilizing on behalf of a cause in order to protect against the essentialist qualities of the rescue paradigm.

Furthermore, local activists and those on the ground cannot be taken for granted. Often,

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they have the most intimate knowledge of the situation and the complexities that surround it.

To remedy counter-effects like those that occurred during the petition campaign for the Nigerian woman described above, Tripp suggests that transnational actors seek advice, direction, and assistance from local actors who “have the most intimate knowledge of issues, other players, conditions, laws, and cultural sensitivities” (Ferree 306). It is absolutely necessary, as seen above, for transnational feminist networks to respect the agency and knowledge of local actors. Recalling Ayesha Iman’s statement that it cannot be assumed that either local or transnational actors “have a monopoly on the best analysis or the most effective strategy” (qtd. in Ferree 307), it perhaps can be assumed that local actors have valuable, specific cultural knowledge that should help inform and shape the course of action a transnational network chooses to take.

At times, it can be difficult to negotiate the balance of power, even when transnational feminist networks are respectful toward the agency and knowledge of local actors. This is in part due to the fact that most of the world’s resources are found in the First World. Women and organizations in the South are dependent upon donors from the North, complicating the autonomy and agency of southern counterparts (Naples 2002, 31). Nancy Naples and Manisha Desai take notice of the difficulty faced by organizers in the Third World who must rely on resources from First World organizations that do not necessarily share their priorities or political framework. Inequalities based on class, education, and access to transnational political forums further inscribe hierarchies of privilege and economic dependencies that are difficult to interrupt and contest. (Naples 2002, 35)
Transnational feminist networks face the challenge of leveling many planes of privilege and power. The course of negotiating these planes is often bumpy, but in the end, it proves to be the most deferential and successful method of parlaying global inequalities. Fortunately, it seems that while transnational feminist networks, “reproduce existing inequalities,” they are also “forged not on preconceived identities and experiences but in the context of struggle and as such are more reflexive about these inequalities” (Desai in Naples 2002, 33) and thereby more willing to face them head on in order to tackle the more tangible issues at hand.
CHAPTER IV

Women’s Organizing in Action:
The Case of a Nicaraguan Women’s Sewing Cooperative

The last chapter introduced methods through which transnational feminist networks can best support and perpetuate lasting, favorable projects in the Third World. Steering clear of patriarchal, condescending tactics embodied by the rescue paradigm while simultaneously incorporating the experience and knowledge of local actors legitimates the organizing and intent of transnational feminist networks. It also sets the stage for actualizing sustainable, locally-operated projects that empower local inhabitants and offer tangible benefits to the community in which the project is located.

These methods appear to function sufficiently in theory, but in reality, complications can arise that require quick thinking and negotiations of power between entities. This chapter engages the Women’s International Sewing Cooperative of Nueva Vida, located just outside Nicaragua, to demonstrate how the previous theoretical methods operate on the ground. The sewing cooperative is a prime example of a transnational network working closely with a Third World community and its leaders to prioritize specific, localized needs. The result achieved is a sustainable, locally-owned and operated business that empowers its members, provides them with a stable economic future, and directly contributes to the community as a whole. Before details of the Women’s International Sewing Cooperative case can be brought to light, however, it is advantageous to discuss the current state of the Nicaraguan economy and its people, events from Nicaragua’s political history that partly influenced the formation of the cooperative, as well as the cooperative’s own unique history.
Currently, the stagnating state of the Nicaraguan economy — Nicaragua is the second poorest country in Latin America after Haiti — is taking an enormous emotional and physical toll on Nicaraguans, 80 percent of whom live in poverty. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) notes, “The breakdown of income distribution shows that 45 per cent of all income goes to the richest 10 per cent of the population, while only 14 per cent goes to the poorest.” This uneven distribution of wealth is particularly noticeable in Managua, the capital city, where expensive malls or buildings stand amid smog and near ghettos of corrugated tin and cardboard. Latin American scholar Denis Lynn Daly Heyck’s description further illustrates the city:

One of every four Nicaraguans lives in Managua, a surreal city in which axle-breaking potholes, pirated power lines, gutted ghosts of buildings destroyed in the 1972 earthquake, and piles of rubble exist alongside fashionable shopping malls, brightly illuminated Shell and Texaco stations with youthful guards toting AK47s, and ubiquitous SUV dealerships for the well-to-do, many of whom are former exiles who began returning from Miami and elsewhere after the Sandinistas were defeated in the 1990 elections. (203)

The average Nicaraguan, however, cannot begin to afford such luxuries. The basic costs to maintain a family of four for one month was approximately US$170 in 2000, but minimum wages only ranged from about US$36 to US$97 a month. Similarly, Jennifer Mendez relates that a Witness for Peace study (1997) estimated the cost for a family of four

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six for one month to be US$162, whereas most workers’ basic monthly wage ranged from US$30 to US$89 per month (Mendez 40). The IMF’s debt policies in Nicaragua seem to have only exacerbated the country’s economic problems by widening the gulf between the wealthy and the poor, exploiting its labor resources, and funneling money away from social services in order to pay back loans.

Nicaragua has a rich and resilient history not without its hardships, dictators, wars, or corruption, but amazing nonetheless. The cultural and political background of Nicaragua informs much of its present day situation and the spirit and body of its people. Colonized in the 16\(^{th}\) century by Spanish conquistadors, Nicaragua became an independent republic in 1838. But Nicaragua would continue to be usurped and used by non-native forces. As Heyck put it, “Except for the ten-year period of Sandinista rule, the country has been governed by oligarchs or US-approved dictators and presidents. … [its] history has been one of exploitation of people and natural resources by imperial powers such as Spain, England, and the US, and by local elites” (204).

In 1990, Violeta Chamorra, the newly elected president, introduced neoliberal economic reforms, such as privatization of state-owned enterprises, in an effort to stabilize the economy and ready Nicaragua for incorporation into the global economy. One aspect of Chamorro’s economic restructuring of Nicaragua was the liquidation of the state-owned textile industry. This wide scale closure had serious implications for thousands of Nicaraguans employed in the sector. Mendez explains:

> The closure of these textile factories eliminated 85 percent of the jobs in the sector, launching some ten thousand workers, the majority of whom were women, into unemployment. This once unionized, largely female workforce was dislocated when these plants closed, providing a trained and desperate labor pool when
transnational assembly factories set up production in the newly opened and nationally owned Free Trade Zone. (38)

Establishing laws to permit the existence of free trade zones (FTZ) in Nicaragua was another aspect of Chamarro’s economic agenda and was a “response to austerity measures imposed by the World Bank and the IMF” aimed to “attract foreign investment and increase export production” (Mendez 10).

Following a series of laws, La Mercedes, the state-owned FTZ, opened in 1992 with eight operational factories (Mendez 11). Since the issuance of laws favorable to FTZs and the opening of La Mercedes, at least five other privately owned zones have been opened in Nicaragua. Mendez remarks, “By late 2001 there were forty-four assembly factories in operation, the great majority of which produced garments for the U.S. market. The number of workers employed in export-processing has grown exponentially from a little over a thousand in 1992 to nearly forty thousand in 2002, and about 90 percent of these are women” (11).

Free trade zones (FTZ), also known as export processing zones, are areas in which some trade barriers, such as tariffs and quotas, are eliminated, tax breaks may be given, and other requirements are lowered. These incentives are meant to entice companies to set up shop, literally, and are generally located in developing countries. Worldwide, it is also commonly an invitation to exploit workers. There are frequent instances of employees in FTZs being mistreated, underpaid, and overworked.

A typical day in a Nicaraguan FTZ is from 7 a.m. to 5:15 a.m. although overtime is often demanded during evenings and on weekends.\(^\text{14}\) Receiving accurate and fair payment for such overtime, or even for regular work hours, is questionable, however.

“Overtime hours as well as production quotas and incentives were often calculated incorrectly, leaving workers short-changed. In addition, pay stubs are often printed in English or Chinese, the languages of the factory owners, making them nearly impossible for workers to decipher” (Mendez 40). Mistreatment does not necessarily end at the pay stub for some employees. There have been recorded incidents that indicate grave human rights abuses are taking place within FTZs. Mendez describes some of these abuses specific to Nicaraguan FTZs:

As in export-processing industries all over the developing world, conditions in Nicaragua’s FTZs are harsh, and workers face injustices on a daily basis. Sexual harassment and shop-floor violence have also been major concerns. MEC [“María Elena Cuadra,” Working and Unemployed Women’s Movement] organizers have encountered several reported cases of women workers being fired for refusing to grant sexual favors to their supervisors. Pregnancy and child care also pose difficulties for women workers, who are often fired if they become pregnant or if they miss work in order to care for children who have fallen ill. (38)

These reported instances of human rights violations beg the question: Why is there no policing force present to hold corporations accountable for their appalling actions? The nations in which these FTZs are located have obviously turned their attention elsewhere or lack the means to adequately enforce existing labor laws and standards. Mendez indicates such forces at work:

There is little or no publicly accessible data regarding the characteristics of maquila workers, pay scales, benefits and production quotas. In addition, regulation of this industry by state or other institutions is almost nonexistent. Most maquila factory managements bluntly disregard state labor legislation. And regulating state agencies such as ministries of labor have been both unable and unwilling to enforce local laws. (Naples 2002, 130)
As a result of this inability by governments or influential global institutions to correct inhumane labor practices, it falls on NGOs and other networks of activists to advocate for improved working conditions in FTZs and maquiladoras. Consumer education becomes strategic in disrupting and exposing illegal procedures and human rights violations (Desai in Naples 2002, 18). Unfortunately, it takes a great deal of time for a large number of consumers to change their consumption patterns, particularly when the cost of sweat free items is passed to the consumer. The cost difference, however, contributes to fair wages, the allowance of sufficient breaks, sick days, and even health benefits for workers.

**The Women’s International Sewing Cooperative of Nueva Vida**

Central America was fiercely hit by Hurricane Mitch in October 1998, causing approximately US$5 billion in damages and the loss of 11,000 lives, although the actual number of lives lost will likely never be known. In Nicaragua specifically, somewhere between 500,000 to 800,000 people were left homeless. In Managua, poor families living in makeshift homes along the shore of Lake Managua were relocated to Nueva Vida, or “New Life.” It became a “new urban area” (Renk 11) located in Ciudad Sandino about seven miles outside Managua. Cuidad Sandino is currently the most densely populated area in Nicaragua with more than 4,500 people per square mile (Renk 11). Most residents earn a living working in one of the nearby FTZs or by selling wares and foods in markets and as street vendors. Becca Renk, a member of Jubilee House Community-Center for Development in Central America (JHC-CDCA) which works with the cooperative full-time, comments that there is little the local government can do to

16 Ibid.
improve conditions in Nueva Vida given that “the mayor’s office has $2.30 per person per year in tax revenues to provide all city services, including maintenance of the municipal infrastructure, refuse removal and support of educational and health care programs” (11).

In the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch, the 8,000 to 14,000 residents of Nueva Vida were mostly unemployed and living conditions were dire. The JHC-CDCA, a U.S.-based non-profit organization, began to help the community become organized by designating local leaders to disperse relief aid fairly and by creating several grassroots neighborhood commissions with specific objectives, such as education, sanitation, and housing. 17 It quickly became clear, however, that permanent, sustainable employment opportunities were critical to the residents’ future once disaster relief ceased. The willingness and commitment of JHC-CDCA to place the concerns of the local constituency at the forefront of their efforts is a critical element involved in the success and sustainability of Women’s International Sewing Cooperative, JHC-CDCA itself, and other local JHC-CDCA projects.

Almost by happenstance, a viable solution for creating more employment opportunities fell into the laps of JHC-CDCA. Soon after Hurricane Mitch, Mike Woodward, founder of JHC-CDCA, chanced upon the production manager of Maggie’s Organics, Peter Murray, who expressed that the Michigan-based organic clothing company was seeking an offshore production site to sew some of their merchandise. “Can they sew?” Murray asked Woodward, referring to the unemployed residents of Nueva

Vida.\textsuperscript{18} From that one close encounter, Woodward began making arrangements with Maggie’s Organics and members of Nueva Vida’s employment commission to develop a worker-owned cooperative. The Nueva Vida employment commission decided to focus on employment options for women and a core group of women were assembled.

Bená Burda, founder and owner of Maggie’s Organics, related in a personal interview that while it was increasingly difficult during the late 1990s to find a U.S. production site able to meet Maggie’s Organics’ standard of quality and finish production on time, she was also reluctant to take advantage of the cheapened labor market made available through the North American Free Trade Agreement:

\begin{quote}
I told our production manager [Peter Murray] at the time … we can keep our socks going because there’s enough of an infrastructure in the apparel industry in the U.S. to still make socks here, but all of our cut and sew goods we have to get out of the country or we’re going to go down. If we go down, I don’t think we can support ourselves on just socks. So, we have to find a way to go offshore, and how do we go offshore without going to sweatshop? Like I said, everyone at the time was going to Mexico.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Therefore, the concept of a sweat-free, worker-owned cooperative appealed to Burda’s senses. Moreover, Burda espouses an atypical business philosophy that naturally functions in tandem with the concept of a worker-owned cooperative. Particularly after a few instances in which quality was compromised by a disconnection between workers and the final product, Burda says a light bulb clicked on. In her own words:

\begin{quote}
It makes so much sense to make the women responsible for their own income. They’re not going to [compromise quality]. They’re not going to cheat me out of my cotton thread, they’re not going to put a hole in my shirt, they’re not going to care that they work two hours overtime to
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} ibid.

Nevertheless, even with a commitment from Maggie’s Organics to provide cloth and give the cooperative all their sewing contracts, except socks, production couldn’t begin right away. First, the women began to build their factory from scratch, beginning in late 1999 to early 2000. An arduous undertaking, the women worked for more than two years, 20 hours a week without pay. Andrea Calderón, a cutter for the Fair Trade Zone and a cooperative member, remarks on the hardships such circumstances created. “The hardest part was going back to the house after working without a salary … that was the hardest part because sometimes we didn’t have the means to feed our children” (Renk 12).

While the members did not receive pay, every hour they worked contributed to a “sweat equity” required to buy into the cooperative. Renk explains:

> Because the candidates for membership in the Fair Trade Zone [another name for the cooperative] did not have the financial means to be able to buy-in to the cooperative, the group decided to accept sweat-equity as each members’ [sic] buy-in. They put a value on each hour worked — including construction work on the factory, hours spent in cooperativism and business trainings, and hours spent in production training. The agreed-upon figure to complete the buy-in was 640 hours of work, equalling [sic] $350. (35-6).

All the same, many of the women involved simply could not afford to give their time toward a project that was unable to provide a wage in the short-term. Lesbia Marina Pérez, also a member of the cooperative, recounts some women’s rationale for leaving

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the project. “They said they couldn’t work here without a salary because how were they going to eat? So a few left, then a few more left, then a few more until there were only eleven left, and we are the ones that are still here.” (Renk 12-3).

These women were finally officially incorporated as the Cooperative Maquiladora Mujeres de Nueva Vida Internacional (COMAMNUVI, Women’s International Sewing Cooperative of Nueva Vida) in February 2001. According to Renk, the women had finished the factory and received their machines through the aid of start-up capital lent to them at a low interest rate by the JHC-CIDCA (13). Because many of the skilled women had left earlier in the project to find work elsewhere, the unskilled women still had to learn to sew, with or without mentors. They attended training classes at the National Institute of Technology (INATEC), a Nicaraguan institution that offers training for all levels of employment in all economic sectors.

Despite being trained, equipped, and ready to begin earning a salary, the women of COMAMNUVI still encountered numerous challenges during their first several years as a cut and sew production site. From faulty fabric to pulling 18-hour shifts to complete a time-sensitive order, the women of the cooperative learned from many mistakes. Work, too, was infrequent. In the beginning, cooperative members may have worked two months to complete a large order, but then would have no more sewing contracts for over half a year. The infrequency of work, and thus the infrequency of pay, drove many workers to find other employment, often in FTZs. Yet, because steady employment was one goal of the cooperative, COMAMNUVI eventually obtained a grant that it used to become a full package service, meaning “the cooperative buys its own raw materials and

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sells a finished product to its clients” (Renk 16). Full package service is attractive to clients and has allowed COMAMNUVI to employ 53 heads of household from Cuidad Sandino and “pay themselves double what the average worker earns in the conventional free trade zones in Nicaragua” (Renk 16).

COMAMNUVI became the first worker-owned free trade zone in October 2004 when it received its free trade certification. As a recognized free trade zone, the cooperative benefits from the loosened trade restrictions and tax breaks other FTZs receive. Yet, because a cooperative is not legally allowed to be a free trade zone, the Fair Trade Zone was formed to administer the FTZ. “The Fair Trade Zone is wholly owned and operated by the members of COMAMNUVI and each member has equal shares in the Fair Trade Zone.” (Renk 16). The profits accrued from the financial incentives of being an FTZ are passed onto the worker-owners of the Fair Trade Zone, instead of the typically foreign upper management, as is the case with most other FTZs. These profits directly increase the cooperative members’ personal incomes (Renk 17) and boost the local economy in which the members participate.

Still, as Fair Trade Zone worker-owner Tomasa Jirón points out, “We’re not millionaires. More than anything else, our work isn’t to make ourselves rich. It’s to maintain ourselves and be working and to give more work to other people” (Renk 17). One of the most integral components of COMAMNUVI is its dedication to “expanding their business specifically so that they can create more employment for families in their community. These families with income then boost the local economy, which benefits the community as a whole” (Renk 6). Some may say this is a beautiful ideal but a difficult reality. Thus far, however, the cooperative has had moderate success at extending
employment opportunities to others in the Nueva Vida/Cuidad Sandino community. For example, COMUMNUVI is working with JHC-CDCA to develop a new project, a cotton spinning loom, that would employ another 45 heads of household and allow the cooperative to potentially create an additional 30 jobs as well. Because the “Fair Trade Zone has a policy that all workers eventually become owners … a lot of work is put into acculturating new workers to cooperativism in order to prepare them for the responsibilities of membership” (Renk 26). Thus, not only does the cooperative provide a more stable, better paying employment opportunity than most Nicaraguans have access to, it is also committed to ensuring that its workers have a permanent stake in their career.

Results of Cooperative Action

The Women’s International Sewing Cooperative of Nueva Vida is an economically feasible endeavor that is the product of both First World and Third World experience, knowledge, dedication, and labor. COMAMNUVI has defied the odds globalization set against a worker-owned cooperative and has expanded twice — once to become a full package service and once to become certified as a Free Trade Zone. COMAMNUVI poses a crucial example of one way in which transnational feminist networks can and should function when working on globalization issues in the Third World. While JHC-CDCA is not, per se, a feminist network, the organizing methods it employed in working with locals to establish the cooperative are indicative of effective strategies that transnational feminist networks can also utilize and implement when working to organize women around a specific issue.

The most striking aspect of the Women's International Sewing Cooperative of Nueva Vida is the transformation of the women themselves. JHC-CDECA was an integral force throughout the formation of the cooperative and has continued to give assistance in the form of extending loans and using their privilege and status to grant COMAMNUVI access to resources otherwise off-limits to the extremely poor. In the process, the women have become business savvy, self-confident owners of their place of employment. Reaching that point certainly did not come without hardship, but their sense of autonomy, entitlement, and security is evident in their own reflections.

Verónica Calero, Member at Large:

“It was a good idea for me to have my own work and leave the life that I had before. I was a housewife, and I was always just waiting for my husband to provide for me. That’s not the way things should be; women should work to get ahead for themselves and always be independent. And I have managed that, I am now independent, I feel independent.”

Rosa Alonso, Administration:

“I started in the co-op because I didn’t have work, and I was taking in washing to feed my children. My oldest daughter was in school and I didn’t know if she was going to be able to continue because of the cost. I felt that since the cooperative was starting at zero, I had an opportunity here. The co-op has been a huge achievement for me personally — it has been a real leap because before I was someone who knew nothing of computers, meetings, airplanes, nothing even of high school. I was afraid of everything.”

Zulema Mena, Treasurer:

“I feel good because I am the owner of my own work, I don’t work for anyone who’s going to take my sweat. We are business owners ourselves, all of us workers.”

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21 Renk 11.
23 Renk 12.
The members of COMAMNUVI have become empowered through their direct participation in the establishment of and continuing viability of the Fair Trade Zone. All members have equal voice and receive equal benefits in their workplace, conditions that are by no means present in other Nicaraguan FTZs where the mostly female workforce is marginalized, both in person and in pay. Renk reflects on the impact the cooperative’s model of participatory democracy has had on its worker-owners:

All the original worker-owners came from the same socio-economic background, and they were all marginalized by the fact that they were desperately poor. When they first came to the project, the majority of the women did not involve themselves in discussion, they remained silent and when asked specifically for an opinion, their response was typically, “Whatever everyone else thinks is fine.” Today, it’s difficult to get a word in edgewise in a meeting of the cooperative, and members voice their opinions confidently.

The women have achieved a laundry list of far-reaching aims — constructing their own factory, learning to sew, obtaining grants, receiving free trade certification — all within the span of less than a decade. Such accomplishments have contributed to COMAMNUVI members’ feelings of autonomy and self-sufficiency. They are now able to provide better for their children and have the time, energy, and the means to go back to school or teach literacy classes in the evenings and on weekends.

While life in poverty-stricken Nueva Vida is still far from ideal and the women are still earning relatively meager salaries (though certainly not compared to most other jobs in Nicaragua), the cooperative has provided a vehicle through which they have agency to determine their own economic futures, thereby granting them control over their economic security as well. Moreover, as Heyck points out below, membership in COMAMNUVI has a personal significance that transcends simple monetary concerns.
Women cooperativists … have spoken of the self-confidence that they now feel, for they have proved to themselves and others that they are capable workers and that they play an important social and economic role. … Despite the “double day” and the countless invisible adjustments made by women … women cooperativists join, rejoin, or remain in cooperatives because they hope through collaboration to survive and, ultimately, to improve their economic situation and that of their children. Thus, they see membership as a way to live with dignity. (281)

Many of the women, it is true, often emphasize their children’s education, health, and futures as driving reasons behind sticking with the cooperative despite the hardships incurred. Now, nearly all of the women’s children attend school regularly. Verónica Calero illustrates the point of living with dignity through membership in the cooperative:

Before we just ate rice and beans, today [my children] can have a piece of chicken or meat. I feel that this has changed because I have four children and thanks to God they are all in school, I can clothe them — maybe not well, but I can clothe them. I feel like I have fewer problems with the salary that I have. I feel less suffocated, economically, than before. (Renk 65)

The strong commitment to family espoused by many of the women cooperativists is indicative of the sentiment among most Nicaraguan people, who characteristically feel strong loyalties toward their families. Thus, for the women cooperativists the opportunity and ability to contribute more to the household leads to increased feelings of self-worth and confidence. For example, Calero is able to supplement the household income and thus feed her family better, clothe her children, and send them to school, whereas before COMAMNUVI she was a housewife “just waiting for my husband to bring home the rice and beans, as we Nicaraguans say” (Renk 65). Traditional gender roles are entrenched in the cultural makeup of Nicaragua, thus stepping into a role as provider or co-provider can be a new and rewarding experience for some of the women.
The members of COMAMNUVI have established themselves as autonomous business owners, as agents of their own destinies. While they did not — and perhaps could not have — established the cooperative without outside expertise from JHC-CDCA, the non-profit NGO continues to respect the experiences and agency of the members and other local actors whom they work with closely. JHC-CDCA member Becca Renk explains that JHC-CDCA attempts to aid communities with “keen attention to the desires of the beneficiaries; with a commitment to work with, not for, the target community; and based in a context of sustainability, which will allow the project to continue long after the JHC has left the community” (10, emphasis in original). It is indeed the intent of JHC-CDCA to remove its presence from the cooperative eventually. Thus, the continual insistence by JHC-CDCA to incorporate the experience and knowledge of Nueva Vida community members in the initial stages and later cooperative members as the business plan evolved is a significant aspect of their positive presence among the community. The assistance of JHC-CDCA and its commitment to the local community’s priorities has contributed to the empowerment of COMAMNUVI members and to the long-term success of the cooperative project. JHC-CDCA never had delusions of grand rescue schemes; rather, it emphasized the local objectives of the area.

Nevertheless, COMAMNUVI is still reliant on JHC-CDCA and its predominantly white members for their language skills and the opportunities their privilege affects in certain circumstances. Currently, most of the cooperative’s sales are transacted in English, but as of now, none of the members are fluent in English. JHC-CDCA serves as a conduit in this regard, assisting with translations and communications between client
and cooperative. Until a member, new or old, is sufficiently fluent in English, then COMAMNUVI is not completely autonomous, for without JHC-CDCA’s English skills, sales transactions would be nearly as troublesome a feat as Nicaraguan FTZ workers attempting to read their Chinese-lettered pay stubs. However, in a personal communication, Becca Renk reported that two cooperative members are currently taking English language courses and that JHC-CDCA is prepared to continue to assist with English communications until September 2007. After that point, Renk related that the cooperative must either have sufficient English skills themselves, or hire someone from outside the cooperative who can translate the English transactions.

As a northern-based NGO, JHC-CDCA has increased access to resources that would otherwise be difficult or even impossible for the poor, mostly uneducated, and Spanish-speaking members of COMAMNUVI to obtain at the same level. Additionally, “Resources certainly include money but may also include access, reputation, influence, and other intangible benefits” that JHC-CDCA is better situated to access due to its status as a northern NGO and the privilege that is conferred through such status. For example, Fair Trade Zone secretary Ruth Garay relates that when cooperative members appear before government officials or in other similar settings accompanied by a typically white JHC-CDCA representative, the reactions are more frequently positive. “They always help us once they see us. It’s like they take an interest once they see a gringo there … but if it were just us, they wouldn’t.” (Renk 58). JHC-CDCA founder Mike Woodward explains that NGO members “can get audiences in places that poor people can’t. … This can be of utmost value to any cooperative — not to make them dependent

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27 Renk 57.
28 Renk, Becca. E-mail to the author. 12 March 2007.
29 Sperling, Ferree, and Risman 1159.
on the NGO, but when they start off with so little it can really help them succeed to have someone accompany them” (Renk 58).

JHC-CDCA does offer COMAMNUVI and the other cooperatives it works with access to a “revolving loan fund” that the businesses pay back with an annual interest rate of six percent. Initially, COMAMNUVI was lent start-up money interest-free from JHC-CDCA in order to buy machinery and construction materials (Renk 32). A percentage of each sale made by the cooperative is paid toward the loan. This interest-free, start-up loan was critical in the beginning of the cooperative, particularly because any bank-sponsored loan would have been hard to come by. Renk explains, “It would have been nearly impossible to convince a bank to loan start-up money for the cooperative to a group of devastatingly poor women with a pipe dream as a business plan and no collateral whatsoever” (32). The revolving loan fund may also be used for short-term loans that are interest-free given that the loan is repaid within three weeks. The cooperative often takes advantage of the short-term loans to cover payroll at the end of the month or the cost of cloth for an impending order (Renk 32). The revolving fund is financed by donations JHC-CDCA receives from individuals, churches, and small groups30 that are predominantly located in the United States. Without JHC-CDCA’s revolving loan fund, COMAMNUVI would have been unable to expand its business in the same manner and with the advantage of such low interest rates. Additionally, holding the cooperative accountable for its loans further instills a sense of ownership over the project — once COMAMNUVI is debt-free, the members can be assured that it was their own sweat and hard-earned money that (eventually) paid for their enterprise.

JHC-CDDCA played a pivotal role in the formation and continuing progress of COMAMNUVI, but Maggie’s Organics also offered up much of its business expertise to help the cooperative members in the long run. The clothing company offered to send all its sewing contracts to COMAMNUVI. It was this promise of sustained work that inspired the existence of the cooperative in the first place. Nonetheless, the relationship between Maggie’s Organics and the cooperative was not always smooth. There were a few initial mishaps involving poor quality fabric and late orders that forced Maggie’s Organics to start using back up sewers to guarantee production.\(^{31}\) Additionally, Burda shares how the women periodically stole fabric from Maggie’s Organics that they then sold in the market in order to buy other needed goods.

> I had to have a real heart to heart with them and say, “If you guys want me to just turn into a philanthropist, I can take $5,000 — because that’s what I’ll probably lose on this project between now and the end of the year — you divvy it up amongst you twenty, you can buy all the shoes your kids need, and then that’s it. The door’s closed. Now is that what you want? Or do you want me to be an ongoing customer, do you want to be a business person, do you want to meet me on an even playing field and stop stealing my fabric?”\(^{32}\)

Burda’s heart to heart was more than a reproach — it was a business proposal with implicit instructions on honest dealings. Through outright instruction as well as trial and error, the members of the cooperative have developed a business etiquette that has helped them retain customers and earn a livable wage. With the aid of Woodward’s narration, Renk relates one such trial and error:

> In the beginning, co-op members saw nothing wrong with simply taking the day’s earnings and dividing them equally among the members, as though they were a family running

\(^{32}\) Ibid.
an informal corner store. “In their first year as a cooperative, they sold 100 scrunchies to a visiting delegation and each took $20 home, leaving nothing for the cooperative,” remembers Mike of JHC-CDCA. When the JHC-CDCA found out about it, Mike called a meeting of the co-op and explained the importance of covering the cooperative’s costs and only sharing out the profits in the manner stipulated by the co-op’s constitution and bylaws. To rectify the situation it was decided that each member would repay the $20 out of their salaries. Some of the members weren’t satisfied with the decision and the situation caused strife not only within the co-op but also between the co-op and JHC-CDCA. “It wasn’t the last time they were tempted,” remembers Mike, “but having to pay the money back certainly made an impression on them. (63-4)

While the attitudes of both Burda and Woodward could be characterized as paternalistic, it is important to recall that in the early stages of the cooperative the members were new to the business world and its dealings. These initial lessons shaped their personal business values and those of the cooperative and contributed to their transformation into able, honest businesswomen.

Moreover, Maggie’s Organics often worked with COMAMNUVI to develop aspects of their business infrastructure that could then be used not only for Maggie’s Organics products, but also for the cooperative’s other clients. Burda explains “[The packing slips were] an example of us saying we’re going to work really hard to tell you how to do your job and once you learn how to do it, then it’s going to help you with all your other customers.”

Progress in refining the production process, such as developing universal packing slips, is one area in which Maggie’s Organics helped COMAMNUVI establish itself as a functional production company and business.

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Burda recognizes the constructive impact of her company’s involvement despite the occasional challenge. Burda recounts that when she visited the cooperative a few years ago with a delegation of customers, she told the women cooperativists, “The beauty of the project now is if we [Maggie’s Organics] never got another product from you [the cooperative], you will survive, your kids will eat, your kids will stay in school. If you never sew another product for us, we will survive.” The cooperative has finally managed firm footing, thus Maggie’s Organics no longer commits all its sewing contracts to the Fair Trade Zone in order for it to subsist. Each is now fully functional without the other.

Not only has the Women’s International Sewing Cooperative of Nueva Vida been able to offer its members economic security and business confidence, it has also created an alternative economic space within the dominant framework of globalization that gives the members more complete control over their destinies. Such an accomplishment has far-reaching significance, not only for these members, but also for other populations worldwide. Renk explains:

The implications of this development are broad: if a small group of poor women — victims of a hurricane — can become a free trade zone, then other groups can do the same. This innovation of a worker-owned free trade zone has the potential to turn the current model of globalization on its head because benefits that have previously been available only to large corporations suddenly become available to those who need them most: the world’s poor.

The Fair Trade Zone, the first worker-owned FTZ, can and should be used as a viable business model in other parts of the world. Establishing and maintaining such an enterprise takes dedication, sacrifice, and perhaps in most cases, outside assistance from

\[34^{Ibid.}\]
organizations like JHC-CDCA. But the result of such effort is Robin Hood-esque —
profits become the domain of local people, rather than exclusively the domain of large,
transnational corporations.
CONCLUSION

Creative Consumption

The Women’s International Sewing Cooperative of Nueva Vida presents opportunities, not only for the members and the community, but also for transnational organizers. The joint efforts of the Nueva Vida women and JHC-Corca informed the success of COMAMNUVI and can furthermore inform the success of other joint efforts between transnational networks and local actors. What is important to note is the strategy with which the network, JHC-Corca, approached its work. While the idea for the cooperative came after JHC-Corca had begun interacting with and assisting the community, the network had already helped local actors establish an infrastructure that was then able to address the formative plans for the cooperative. All of the decision-making, such as designating women’s employment as a main concern, was done by local actors. Later, planning, construction, sewing, and so on was also done by local actors, although JHC-Corca was still absolutely essential for its knowledge of business planning and laws and its access to government officials and some limited financial resources.

The cooperative is a real-life example of women organizing to develop new strategies and methods by which to confound and resist the gendered processes of globalization. The problematic Western feminist theorizations discussed in chapter one in which Third World women were characterized at times as victims who lacked the agency or knowledge needed to change or transform their situations has been confounded by COMAMNUVI. The initial eleven women proved their own tenacity in striving toward a “pipe dream” (Renk 32) they viewed as a viable economic alternative to succumbing to work in a Nicaraguan FTZ, where they knew the hours, pay, and treatment of workers...
was less than pleasant or acceptable. Similarly, members of COMAMNUVI have challenged precepts of globalization, the most notable being their ability to become a free trade zone despite laws that forbid worker-owned FTZs. The business model of COMAMNUVI proves that economic success in the global sphere does not have to take place within the framework of globalization as dictated by neoclassical economics.

Yet, a large reason for the success of COMAMNUVI and its FTZ the Fair Trade Zone was its market niche. Maggie’s Organics promised an export market for the cooperative, thus giving it the advantage of not being constrained by the ups and downs of the local Nicaraguan economy. Becca Renk describes how this aspect was crucial to the success of the cooperative:

> In the Nicaraguan economy … there is a very limited amount of capital circulating, and the Fair Trade Zone would not be able to compete with cheap goods flooding the market from other countries. The cooperative would have to lower salaries, compromise quality and lay off workers in order to undersell the competition. (7)

With a market based primarily in the United States, the Fair Trade Zone exports its products and in exchange draws foreign capital into Nicaragua and, “more importantly, directly into the pockets of the worker-owners in their cooperative” (Renk 7). Because Maggie’s Organics had promised a market for goods made by COMAMNUVI, the cooperative was able to build accordingly to meet the demand in that market. This strategy, according to Renk, helps ensure a cooperative will not “invest time, energy and finances into making a product that it later won’t be able to sell” (34).

It is distinctive to note that Maggie’s Organics sells organic cotton clothing. Its buyers, then, are to a large extent “creative consumers.” These are individuals willing to pay a few more dollars to invest in organic, fair trade, sweat free merchandise. This niche
for creative consumers is a small but useful, both for the environment and for the workers who make, grow, or build the products.

Money speaks louder than words or actions in a capitalistic, globalized world. Part of fighting toward equality in the global arena and ensuring fair labor practices is for consumers to demand producers to make sweat free products — and then buy them. This cooperative has a built-in niche, a market of “creative consumers” willing to pay a little more for an organic, sweat free item that supports members of the cooperative and thereby contributes to the local Nicaraguan economy. It’s like going to a restaurant and tipping a little extra for excellent service.

Owning and buying all sweat free products may make an individual feel better about what’s in their closet and cupboards, but the extent of globalization’s impact on women is far more vast. A few cooperatives cannot feasibly employ the thousands subsisting in poverty. What must occur is a transformation in the way in which processes of globalization are conducted so local entities — the government, NGOs, and locals — have influence over the course of their economic futures. Similarly, a transformation must occur in the way consumers interpret their dollars’ worth. Buying responsible products may cost more, but if there is a greater demand for fair trade, sweat free products, the result is a larger market, more diversity in products, and lower costs. Everyone must participate in the global economy with a notion of self-monitored social responsibility and awareness.

The most salient points to come forth in this project have been that constant vigilance is required in transnational feminist organizing to avoid generalizing, misrepresenting, or even harming the populations with which one is working. The most effective solution to
prevent such negative effects is to account for and respect local actors’ experience and knowledge. Empowerment can be derived from cooperation, but not from instances of disregard or ignorance. Furthermore, in order to see a project succeed, engaging the populations that will sustain it is critical, for the project will continue affect the lives and futures of those in the locality even after the transnational network has moved on. The result of such cooperative actions is lasting effects that incorporate and empower local actors. In the case of the Women’s International Sewing Cooperative specifically, such cooperative actions precipitated a more viable economic opportunity than those presently offered by globalization, empowered a populace of Third World worker-owners, the majority of whom are women, and granted those worker-owners the agency to define and determine their economic futures. Such enduring results demonstrate the real power implicit in crafting strategies from both theory and practice.


