

## The Paradoxes and Potentials for Women's Empowerment in Latin American Agricultural Co-operatives: The Case of Honduras

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In Latin America, women make up the majority of agricultural co-operative workers, yet they make up only 20 per cent of agricultural co-op membership and even less of co-operative leadership. The objective of the research is twofold: to interrogate the paradoxes and potentials for the co-operative development model to empower women, and to identify innovative strategies and practices that enable women to have equal opportunity to participate actively in the life of the co-operative. The research utilizes feminist standpoint methodology and a mix of a gender and development (GAD) and socialist feminist theoretical models to analyze primary data from four semi-structured interviews with representatives from Honduran and Central American co-operative associations, with a focus on the Honduran co-operative movement. Findings suggest that there are three barriers that interact to limit women's co-operative participation that are supported at their base by a culture of *machismo*: legal barriers to co-operative membership; equity-blind co-operative governance structures; and the over-burden of women's traditional reproductive responsibilities in the home. Addressing these barriers should therefore include legal advocacy, women's rights education, technical training and capacity building, and networking with women's organizations, among other actions. Overall, the paper argues that realizing the potential for co-operatives to empower women in Latin America depends upon the cultivation of enabling ideologies and institutions that challenge *machista* cultural norms and address legal barriers and other structural obstacles to women's full participation in co-operative development.


*Key Words:* gender and development, empowerment, agricultural co-operative, co-operative membership, Honduras

### Introduction

Co-operatives and other collective forms of economic and social enterprise have proven potential to improve women's social participation and economic wellbeing (Amaza et al., 1999; Datta & Gailey, 2012; Jones et al., 2012; United Nations International Year of Co-operatives [UNIYC], 2012). Data suggest that women's participation in agricultural co-operatives in particular leads to significant development outcomes such as increases in food security, nutrition, social capital, and child educational attainment (UNIYC, 2012; United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2011). Studies also show that women members of collective organizations often report increased self-esteem and a sense of solidarity and support (Government of Chile, 2015, p. 78; Jones et al., 2012). However, a comprehensive study by the Government of Chile (2015) on women's participation in Latin American co-operatives found that while women make up the majority of agricultural co-operative workers, they make up only 20 per cent of agricultural co-op membership and even less of co-operative leadership (p. 93-94).

Researchers have put forth various theories for the gender gap in co-operative participation (Amaza et al., 1999; Arnfred, 2002; Datta & Gailey, 2012; Food and Agricultural Organization [FAO], 2011). This paper focuses on the impacts of co-operative membership laws and legal and cultural institutions that affect women's equal membership, participation and empowerment from co-operatives in Latin America. Specifically, the paper identifies three common barriers to women's co-operative participation that are supported at their base by a culture of *machismo* in Honduras. First, legal barriers exist such as access to land title that limit women's access to co-operative membership (FAO, 1996; USAID, 2011). Second, co-ops' productive and governance tasks are not structured or resourced to support women's co-operative participation, putting women at a disadvantage in relation to men in co-operative leadership races and in other governance activities (Carlestam & Lukschandl, 2008, p. 221; FAO, 1996, 2011).

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Third, women's household expectations and obligations restrict their time to participate in co-operative and other productive activities outside of the home. The paper subsequently identifies strategies and practices that are designed to address these barriers and increase the opportunities for women to participate<sup>1</sup> equally with men in the life of their co-operative. These practices include legal advocacy, women's rights education, technical training and capacity building, and networking with women's organizations. Overall, the paper argues that realizing the potential for co-operatives to empower<sup>2</sup> women in Latin America depends upon the cultivation of enabling ideologies and institutions that challenge *machista*<sup>3</sup> cultural norms and address legal barriers and other structural obstacles to women's full participation in co-operative development.

The paper employs and advances a Gender and Development (GAD) theoretical framework outlined by Arnfred (2002) with a socialist feminist analysis summarized by Lorber (2010) and others to interrogate the paradoxes and potentials for the co-operative development model to empower women. Feminist theories such as GAD are built on the concept of the social construction of gender, which is meant to illuminate power struggles within patriarchal gender relations (Arnfred, 2002, p. 75; Baden & Goetz, 1998). However, the field of gender and development has been criticized by some development practitioners and Southern feminist activists for being overly technocratic and for erasing rather than addressing the issues of power relations that are central to women's subordination (Baden & Goetz, 1998, p. 5-6; Lidström, 2014). This paper responds to these criticisms by consciously integrating socialist feminist political economy questions that maintain power inequality and anti-capitalist grassroots political struggle as essential foci of analysis. In this field, theorists such as Mayoux (1995b) emphasize the ways in which capitalist relations and the gendered division of labour combine to subordinate women's positions vis-à-vis men (p. 211). GAD and socialist feminist theoretical frames will be useful in questioning the ways in which the ideals of cooperation and women's empowerment can be activated in response to—and sometimes in opposition to—the capitalist context in which co-operatives operate (Arnfred, 2002; Mayoux, 1995b, p. 211). In addition to theoretical considerations, the research is informed by a feminist standpoint methodology advanced by Harding (1987, 2005), Olesen (2011) and Sprague (2005) using primary data from four semi-structured interviews with representatives from Honduras and Central American co-operative associations. As a method, results also integrate analysis of policy and legal documents, published academic research, and secondary literature.

The paper is laid out in the following way: after providing an overview of recent literature on women in co-operatives, the paper will describe the GAD and socialist feminist theories chosen as the frame of analysis. The paper will subsequently describe the feminist standpoint methodology and the research methods used to gather data. Next, the paper sketches the broad political and economic context for the Honduran case study, which is characterized by narrow democratic spaces and increasingly violent land conflicts (Free-ston, 2015). Afterwards, the paper analyzes the laws and decision making structures of Honduras and other Latin American farmer co-operatives as well as the home economies of women in co-operatives and assesses their impact on the opportunities for women's empowerment. The final section discusses the limitations and conclusions of the research and offers suggested directions for future research on enabling structures and programming that can support women to become equal and active members of their co-operative.

## Literature Review

### The Potential of Co-operatives to Empower Women

There is a substantial and growing body of literature that draws the links between co-operative development and improvements in women's social participation and economic wellbeing (Amaza et al., 1999; Datta & Gailey, 2012; International Labor Organization [ILO], 2010; Jones et al., 2012; UNIYC, 2012; Prakash, 2003). In a study on women in co-operatives in Nigeria and India, for instance, Datta and Gailey find that women's engagement in co-operative activities increased their economic security, entrepreneurial skills, and the health and wellbeing of their families in comparison to non-cooperative members (2012). Two other studies by the World Bank (2009) and by Jones, Smith and Wills (2012, p. 13) also find that co-operatives can provide a platform for women to organize a network of solidarity and mutual support to overcome lack of access to commercial activities such as credit, technical training, and land tenure. Co-operatives themselves are also more successful when women become actively involved, as noted by Mayoux (1995; 1995b) in her case study on women in Indian producer co-operatives and in subsequent research on women in co-operatives in Nicaragua.

However, Mayoux (1995) and others qualify their assessments of women's empowerment through co-operative participation as dependent upon supporting institutions such as access to productive resources and co-op membership (UNIYC, 2012; Lidström, 2014; Nair & Moolakkatu, 2015; FAO, 1996, 2011; USAID, 2011). Women's movements in Latin America have

been leading efforts to increase institutional spaces for women in co-operatives and other collective enterprises for decades, through organizations such as Co-operatives of the Americas (a regional office of the International Cooperative Alliance), and in the Honduran case, through the Latin American Women's Co-operative School (herein referred to as the 'Co-operative School'). An assessment of the advances and continuing challenges of these organizations is warranted in order to assess the current status of women in Latin American co-operatives.

### **Membership Provisions in Co-operative Law: Towards Gender Equality**

Since the Second World War, co-operative movements in Latin America have made significant progress in modernizing and consolidating a legal framework for co-operative development in the region, enabling greater cross-national cooperation between co-operatives and enhancing opportunities for applying lessons from particular national contexts such as Honduras to other Latin American co-operative jurisdictions (Uribe, 2002, p. 343). The 1988 *Project of a Framework Law for Co-operatives in Latin America* led by the Cooperatives of Americas was a consolidation of these efforts (Carcogna, 2013, p. 166). In accordance with co-operative principles around the world, membership is open and voluntary, and both individuals and legal entities can become members and avail themselves of co-operative services, according to section 2.1 of the framework relating to co-op membership (Carcogna, 2013, p. 174).

The framework law allows for co-op membership to be subject to conditions established in the bylaws of a particular co-operative, which is meant to infuse a degree of flexibility into the structure of co-operative membership laws. For example, some agricultural co-operatives have built land tenure or ownership requirements into their membership bylaws (USAID, 2011; FAO, 1996). However, women hold significantly less land title than men in Latin America (FAO, 2011); One study on the gender asset gap found that in few Latin American countries do women constitute even one-quarter of the landowners (Deere & Leon, 2003, p. 945). Honduras reflects this larger trend with only 24 percent of Honduran women listed as landowners (USAID, 2011, p. 1). Deere and Leon's assessment was that gender inequality in land ownership is related to "male preference in inheritance, male privilege in marriage, male bias in community and state programs of land distribution as well as gender bias in the land market, with women less likely than men to be successful buyers" (2003, p. 945). Therefore, legal provisions requiring land title for co-operative membership backed by *machista* cultural attitudes have the effect

of diminishing women's access to co-operative membership, excluding them from the services and supports that flow from co-op membership in Honduras and in other Latin American countries.

Throughout the project of a *Framework Law for Co-operatives in Latin America* and nationally in Honduras, women's groups have sought to diminish ambiguity regarding equal membership rights for women in co-operatives. At the regional level, women's groups were successful in changing the framework law with the provision that the same rights and obligations are recognized for all members, without any gender distinction (Carcogna, 2013, p. 174). Nationally in Honduras, the Co-operative School and a government body, the National Institute of Women (*Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres* [INAM]), organized the Women Cooperativist's Regional Project that sought to incorporate five gender equality principles within the *Honduran Co-operatives Act* in 2014 (Secretaría del Estado [*Secretary of State*], 2014a, 2014b):

- 1) The elimination of all forms of discrimination (explicit or implicit);
- 2) The inclusion of specific organizations representing the rights of women in all co-operatives;
- 3) Fair resources for men and women;
- 4) Affirmative action to correct historical inequalities women have faced; and
- 5) The use of inclusive language in co-operative by-laws.

Government of Chile, 2015, p. 16

These legal successes and continuing mobilizations of women in the Honduran co-operative movement followed years of education and skills training by the Co-operative School and other grassroots organizations. The training sessions focused on rights-based approaches to gender empowerment work, targeting enduring *machista* cultural norms that make invisible women's contributions to productive activities and limit their access to leadership positions within co-operatives.

This history of some of the gendered politics of co-operative membership laws at the regional and national level illuminates the ways in which both *machista* cultural norms and legal ambiguities affect women's full participation in the co-operative movement. The literature also identifies women's strategies of resistance to gender discrimination and their varied successes in advancing the gender equality agenda in Honduras and in Latin America more generally. What follows is a theoretical framework to analyze these movements and assess their implications for women's empowerment through both mainstream and critical gender lenses.

## Theoretical Framework

One of the most common frameworks used to analyze gender issues in development studies is gender and development (GAD) theory (Jackson & Pearson, 1998). GAD emerged in the 1970s and 80s from debates in Western international development institutions on how best to integrate women and gender issues into development theory and programming (Beetham & Demetriades, 2007, p. 199-203; Jackson & Pearson, 1998, p. 2-6; Young, 1997, p. 51-57). Early theorizing came under the frame of “women in development” (WID) and later transformed into gender and development (GAD) due to critiques that WID merely sought to introduce women into a patriarchal social order (Young, 1997, p. 51). In response to this critique, GAD more explicitly challenges gender subordination with its emphasis on the social construction of gender, which is meant to expose and interrogate power struggles within patriarchal gender relations (Arnfred, 2002, p. 75; Baden & Goetz, 1998; Hannan, 2000, p. 285-7). Recent developments in the GAD field have aimed to mainstream attention to gender equality in policies and institutional practices that set the overall conditions for development (Jackson & Pearson, 1998, p. 2-6; Hannan, 2000, p. 285-7). GAD is an appropriate starting point for analyzing women in co-operative organizations and movements because it focuses attention to the ways in which women can empower themselves and transform gender relations through engagement in decision-making and economic production processes.

While the field of GAD pioneered the institutionalization of gender issues in development debates, it has been criticized by some development practitioners and Southern feminist activists for being overly technocratic and for erasing rather than addressing the issues of power relations that are central to women’s subordination (Baden & Goetz, 1998, p. 5-6; Jackson & Pearson, 1998, p. 2-6; Lidström, 2014). For instance, the World Bank in its *Engendering Development* report (2000) questioned the implicit message of gender mainstreaming, that “development” — understood as expanded market relations— needs women (p. 77; see also Royal Tropical Institute [KIT], 2012, p. 20). Similarly, the organization Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) notes that “income generating activities for women are promoted [through GAD], but a redefinition of sex roles to alleviate the resulting double burden is ignored” (2000, p. 106). This paper responds to these criticisms of mainstream GAD theory by integrating critical feminist frames of analysis that may be better equipped to probe the dynamics of gender inequality that are enmeshed within, and sometimes disrupt, capitalist relations of production.

In general, critical feminist theories identify and connect micro and macro levels of domination relations that impede women from equal participation in society (Ghorayshi & Belanger, 1996, p. 8). Within the critical feminist field of thought, socialist feminist theories connect critiques of capitalism and patriarchy, facilitating analysis of how both economic and social relations must transform to achieve gender equality (Beneria, 1997, p. 327). Socialist feminism is particularly focused on uncovering and challenging the ways in which capitalist relations devalue and render invisible women’s contributions to society (DAWN, 2000, p. 79; Ghorayshi & Belanger, 1996; Lorber, 2010, p. 47).

An anti-capitalist lens is appropriate in analyzing co-operative development since the co-operative model of collective ownership defies the capitalist pillar of private ownership as the basis for the control over the means of production (Beneria, 1997, p. 327). Adding a critical feminist angle to this analysis leads the researcher to further question the ways in which women may experience political struggles to transform capitalist institutions of private property differently, and sometimes in competition with, men (Beneria, 1997, p. 328). Thus, a socialist feminist frame for analyzing the stories of women in co-operatives in the Honduran case will build upon the narrative of class-based struggles between the landed elite and grassroots co-operatives by engendering “class” in relational terms. If “class” is defined as the “practices and relations that provide differential access to and control over the means of provisioning and survival” (Lorber, 2010, p. 51), then power struggles between men and women for control over productive resources within the co-operative movement can be highlighted in addition to resistance against the landed capitalist class. Two final factors that underline socialist feminist analysis are the interaction between the material and the ideological aspects of women’s conditions, and the gendered division of labour (Beneria, 1997, p. 329; Lorber, 2010, p. 52). These two factors are both critical to understanding how enduring patriarchal values privilege men and subordinate women both in the marketplace and in the private sphere through the devaluation of non-marketized reproductive labour (Jackson & Pearson, 1998, p. 9-12), which often falls on women in rural Latin American economies where agricultural co-operatives operate. The subsequent section will introduce the research methods and elaborate on this feminist theoretical framework with a complimentary feminist methodological approach to the research.

## Methods

The method of data collection for this study was four semi-structured qualitative interviews with women in

the Honduran co-operative movement. Participants were selected through snowball sampling for their roles as leaders in gender empowerment programming in rural co-operative associations and other *campesino*<sup>4</sup> organizations in Honduras and Central America. A full list of interview participants and both English and Spanish versions of the interview questions are available in Annex A. With participants' consent, notes were taken during the interviews and with their approval, attributable quotes and paraphrases are used in this paper. A manual content analysis was applied to the interview data to identify patterns as well as deviant data from the sample. Investigation into academic and grey literature was also used to fill in gaps in the data. Although the data collection method does not lend itself to generalizable conclusions, it was chosen as an efficient and apt way to learn widely applicable lessons from female leaders with years of experience in the Honduran co-operative movement.

The methodological approach chosen for the four primary interviews is feminist standpoint theory (herein referred to as simply 'standpoint theory'), which argues that knowledge is specific to an individual's position within the material division of labour and social stratification systems (Olesen, 2011, p. 130; Sprague, 2005, p. 41). In contrast to radical constructivist's views that knowledge is relative, standpoint theorists maintain that knowledge is partial, local, and historically specific (Olesen, 2011, p. 130). Consequently, standpoint theory rejects essentialized and universalized notions of "women" for the idea of the situated woman whose knowledge is specific to her position within the matrix of intersecting systems of oppression (Ghorayshi & Belanger, 1996, p. viii; Harding, 1987, p. 184; Olesen, 2011, p. 130).

Standpoint theory is compatible with GAD and socialist feminist theories because it privileges the multiple identities and subjectivities that are inherent in individuals' testimony, and it constructs individual narratives as situated within particular historical and social contexts (Olesen, 2011, p. 130). Similar to socialist feminism, standpoint methodologies also developed to explicitly privilege marginalized "outsider" voices and "every day, every night activities" (Smith, 1987, p. 91) as a starting point for knowledge production (Rolin, 2005, p. 218-220). As Arnfred notes, "often in social science a view from the margin, from the periphery or from below, is necessary in order to reveal what the centre itself is not able (or willing) to see" (2002, p. 79). This helps to destabilize the mainstream "insider" approach to gender and development frameworks that focus on analyzing women's insertion into productive capitalist activities (Olesen, 2011, p. 131). Nancy Hartsock further connects socialist feminism with standpoint theory, arguing that women's circumstances and experiences within the material order

provide them with particular and privileged knowledges that reflect both oppression and resistance to capitalist and patriarchal domination (1985). In this way, standpoint theory opens spaces for social action by deconstructing the specificities of power in different contexts (Harding, 1997; Harding & Norberg, 2005; Rolin, 2005, p. 218-220).

A final methodological consideration stemming from standpoint theory concerns researcher reflexivity. Standpoint theorists emphasize the importance of recognizing the multiple ways in which feminist scholars "participate as subjects in the relations of ruling" (Harding, 1987, p. 96). This leads the researcher to probe power relations through the knowledge production process by, for example, reflecting upon the varied ways in which text mediates, transforms and gives power to — or takes power from — women's lived experiences and orally-transferred knowledge (Harding & Norberg, 2005, p. 2011). The researcher is also drawn to interrogating the ways in which Northern feminists are accountable to Southern feminists who participate in academic research through the power that is divulged by sharing situated knowledge (Olesen, 2011, p. 132; Ghorayshi & Belanger, 1996, p. 25-27). These considerations are important for a reflexive approach to building narrative through the four primary interviews with women co-op leaders in Honduras. I acknowledge my biases and limitations as a Western-trained scholar and the fragmented knowledge that I can produce by representing women's individual struggles for empowerment through textual academic media. Given these limitations, this paper will implement standpoint methodology by positioning and analyzing participants' testimonies within the broader national context of Honduras. This context has been characterized by decreasing democratic space and increasingly violent land conflicts in which men and women in co-operative organizations are frequently targeted and even killed, especially since the 2009 coup (Freeston, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2014; Rights Action, 2015; Plataforma Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, Democracia y Desarrollo [PIHDD] [*Interamerican Platform for Human Rights, Democracy and Development*], 2009).

### Description of Case

One of the most enduring legacies of colonialism in Latin America is a highly unequal distribution of political and capital resources that has precipitated the militarization of politics and the presence of protracted and often violent land conflicts between the landed elite and the *campesinos* who work and live off the land (Kerssen, 2013, p. 1-13). In response to this legacy, co-operatives became a preferred mode of peasant organization because the co-operative model enables

direct, egalitarian, and communal control over resources, facilitating collective mobilization in peasants' struggles for political power and sovereignty over their land (Kerssen, 2013). The historical dynamics of Latin American co-operative development in the context of militarized land conflicts are mirrored in Honduras, a country where 74 percent of the population lives rurally and where the distribution of land is also highly unequal (USAID, 2011, p. 4).<sup>5</sup> Women's historical and contemporary struggles for empowerment within the Honduran co-operative movement must be understood within these larger political struggles for democracy and land sovereignty.

### Co-operatives in a "Democradura": A History of Land Grabs and Power Grabs

Although Honduras is currently considered a "partly free" democracy according to Freedom House (2015), the country has a political history rife with authoritarianism, corruption, American imperialism and military repression of dissent, which resurfaced most strikingly during and since the 2009 coup of then-President Manuel Zelaya Rosales (Fasquelle, 2011, p. 2; Karl, 1990, p. 2; Ruhl, 2011, p. 549-50).<sup>6</sup> Guillermo O' Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (1986) have described Honduras's militarization of democracy as a "*democradura*" — a term they use to describe "a nominally democratic country that actually is dominated by its armed forces" (p. 9). This context limits possibilities for an effective rule of law and guarantees for political freedom, which have proven to be enduring challenges for Honduran social movements, including the co-operative movement (Ruhl, 2000, p. 52-53; Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular [FNRP] [*National Popular Resistance Front*], 2015; Goodman, 2011).

Honduras's *democradura* has negatively affected the women's co-operative movement since its early history in the 1980s. In the context of the Cold War and with generous amounts of US military aid, the first civilian president Suazo Córdova allied with military General Alvarez Martinez to engage in what would be called the "dirty war" where they sanctioned the torture and killing of suspected revolutionaries in the country (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Ruhl, 2000). Included in Córdova and Martinez's list of subversives were the leaders of the Federation of Women Campesinas (FEMUCH), Honduras's first national rural women's organization that is credited with beginning concerted political organizing specifically for rural women's interests in the Honduran co-operative and agrarian reform movements (Banco Centroamericano de Integración Económica [BCIE] [*Central American Bank for Economic Integration*], 2009; Green Development Foundation [GDF], 2009, p. 9; Kerssen, 2013, p. 18, 21). The fact that the Honduran state interpreted

FEMUCH as a communist threat demonstrates how women's organizing for material advancement in the co-operative movement was subordinated to militarized liberal prerogatives, which connects to social feminist critiques of the role of the state in maintaining a capitalist status quo that oppresses women (Mayoux, 1995b, p. 211; DAWN, 2000, p. 79).<sup>7</sup>

Since this early history, while women in Honduras's co-operative movement have continued to organize in solidarity with larger struggles for democracy and agrarian reform, they have also had to organize for their demands separately because women's equality with respect to political representation, economic resources and social outcomes were simply not being realized within mixed co-operatives (GDF, 2009, p. 10). For this purpose, the National Council Cooperative of Women of Honduras (CONAMUCOPHL) was founded in 1987 with the goals to make women's productive contributions in agriculture visible and to promote the participation of women in Honduras's co-operative sector (BCIE, 2009; GDF, 2009, p. 9-10; Secretaría del Estado [*Secretary of State*], 2014a, 2014b). These goals were aligned with the GAD beliefs of the day that women's insertion into productive systems would lead to their empowerment (Beetham & Demetriades, 2007, p. 199-203; GDF, 2009, p. 9). Another more recent example of targeted women's rights organizing in the absence of women's equality being realized in mixed co-operatives is the mobilization around *Decree Law No. 34-2000 for Equal Opportunities for Women* (INAM, 2000; Carlestam & Lukschandl, 2008, p. 56). This law repealed former laws and administrative practices that restricted or limited the equal possibility of women acquiring land as owner or as renter, which has already been identified as a barrier to women's participation and empowerment in agricultural co-operatives (INAM, 2000, p. 11). Still, a study by the Green Development Foundation (GDF) estimates that while Honduran women participate in 60 percent of the agricultural value chain, many of their contributions remain unrecognized legally and are not remunerated economically, including in farmer co-operatives (GDF, 2009, p. 10). This continued invisibility of women's contributions to agriculture underscores the importance of sustained mobilization of women for inclusion in the co-operative movement.

Another example of women's exclusion in the Honduran co-operative movement concerns the land grabs that took place in the 1990s under the 1992 *Agrarian Modernization Act*. This law reversed long standing agrarian reform policies by liberalizing the land market and instituting investment rules that favored capital intensive agri-businesses, leading to the transfer and concentration of collectively-held land —

including many co-operatives — to large-scale industrial landholders (Council on Hemispheric Affairs [COHA], 2015; Cáceres, 2014; Kerssen, 2013, p. 18, 21). A woman co-op member in video-journalist Jessie Freeston's documentary *Resistencia* (Resistance) asks the important question: "if women had been allowed to participate [in co-operative decision making] then maybe all that land wouldn't have been sold" (2015, min.35). The co-op member goes on to explain, "if women had participated, their first concern would be the long-term well-being of their family," (2015, min.35) and not the short-term gains from the sale of land. This is a valid question for this paper's analysis and highlights the value added of women's perspectives in co-operative decision-making. It is also an example of the ways in which the imposition of neoliberal capitalist relations conflicts with the values of the household care economy and negatively affects the ability of women co-operative members to realize these values because they are silenced within the co-operative movement.

Given these divergent trends of the women's and co-operative movements in the 1990s and early 2000s, it is important to also draw attention to the issue that many land transfers in Honduras take place under the threat of violence or retribution, demonstrated by near weekly targeted killings of co-operative leaders, which have intensified since the 2009 coup (COFADEH, 2009).<sup>8</sup> The Honduran state, represented by the courts and local police, invariably sides in favor of large land owners by authorizing peasant detentions and facilitating evictions of *campesinos* on contested land in addition to granting impunity for *campesino* murders (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Freeston, 2015; interview B).<sup>9</sup> The impact of this precarious legal situation engenders uncertainty and insecurity for co-op farmers, as expressed by one co-operative member as she laments that in her country "it is terrible to know that the police aren't here to defend you, but to destroy you" (Freeston, 2015, min.57).

This dire situation has moved many peasant organizations to abandon legal strategies demanding investigation into fraudulent land deals and opt instead for coordinated occupations of contested land to assert their rights to self-determination and to productive resources (Kerssen, 2013). However, as researcher Kim Moberger (2010) points out, "although women in Honduras ... have participated in guerrilla movements, land occupations, demonstrations and strikes, the results have not always involved strengthened rights for women" (p. 24). The multiple systems of oppression that women in these larger social movements face, and the sacrifices they have made and continue to make for the causes of democracy and land sovereignty, illus-

trate the multi-layered challenges to women's empowerment that extend within and beyond the co-operative movement.

In sum, the elite's historic and contemporary military repression of popular efforts for more equal distribution of resources and more citizen participation and representation in Honduran politics provides the overarching political backdrop of women's experiences, strategies, and outcomes in the national co-operative movement (see Annex B). Within an understanding of the context of structurally weak, normatively disadvantageous, and violently oppressive political and legal systems for *campesinos* and other marginalized groups, the following section will provide situated, micro-scale points of insight from some of the women that are leading these struggles for "the democratization of land, food and political power" (Kerssen, 2013, p. 2).

## Findings and Implications

This study's contribution to the narrative of Honduras's co-operative movement consists of insights from four one-hour interviews conducted between July and September 2015, with women from co-operatives and rural development organizations that are leading gender equality initiatives in the Honduran co-op sector. The research participants identified three levels of barriers to women's empowerment through co-operatives: in co-operative membership laws, in co-operative governance structures, and at the household level. They wove a common thread of *machista* cultural norms as the backbone of these barriers, illustrating the ideological conditions for women's material oppression in Honduras. After introducing the research participants and the work of the organizations in the research sample, the section analyzes these structural, cultural and individual barriers to women's empowerment as well as the strategies that are being employed by the sampled organizations to overcome some of these challenges.

## Introduction of research participants

The first interview was conducted with international co-operative development partner Ms. Linn Lukschandl, who is the coordinator of the We Effect (former Swedish Cooperative Centre, SCC) Latin American Regional Program for Equality and Rights, headquartered in Guatemala City (interview A). Lukschandl has worked closely with women in Honduran co-ops through the Co-operative School, which was initiated with funding and coordination support from We Effect's Latin America Program with the goal of mainstreaming gender equality into co-operative laws in Latin America (Government of Chile,

2015, p. 14-16). The gender mainstreaming approach to We Effect's gender work will provide insights on the implementation of the GAD model in Honduran co-operative laws.

Ms. Wendy Cruz is the coordinator of the Commission of Women of *La Vía Campesina*, one of the largest peasant organizations in the world that was established in 1993 to "defend small-scale sustainable agriculture as a way to promote social justice and dignity" (La Vía Campesina, 2011; interview B). *La Vía Campesina* utilizes a socialist feminist frame of analysis and activism, with the broad goal "to realize food sovereignty<sup>10</sup> and stop the destructive neoliberal process that along with patriarchy, marginalizes and oppresses women" (2011). Thus, *La Vía Campesina* "defends women rights and gender equality at all levels [and] struggles against all forms of violence against women" (2011). The Honduran arm of *La Vía Campesina* is structured as an umbrella organization that represents eleven regional Honduran organizations and peasant movements across the country, with the Commission of Women as the central coordinating body. Currently *La Vía Campesina* in Honduras focuses on growing women's networks, organizing women's rights workshops, and supporting rural credit unions that offer discounted loans to women (interview B). In addition, *La Vía Campesina* is on the front lines of supporting the families of the hundreds of criminalized *campesinas* who have been separated from their children by authorities during land evictions and conflicts (interview B).

Ms. Celina García is the coordinator of the Project to Build Capacity of Campesino Organizations (FORCOC), which has been assisting primary and secondary regional farmer co-operatives including the Federation of Co-operatives for Agrarian Reform in Honduras (FECORAH) and the National Farmers' Association (ACAN) (interview C). In the past three years FORCOC has integrated both GAD and critical feminist approaches to gender programming by developing a comprehensive gender policy with FECORAH that includes, among other programming, workshops with men of grassroots organizations that discuss patriarchal masculinity and the ways in which patriarchal gender constructions perpetuate oppressive power relations that subordinate women (FECORAH, 2012, p. 3).

The final interview was conducted with Ms. Nelly Antonia Vásquez Argueta, the first female president of the Federation of Agricultural Co-operatives of the North Zone of Morazán (FECANM), delegate of a mixed agricultural co-operative that arose in the context of the Salvadorian civil war peace agreements in 1992 from the social base of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and former combatants (interview D). The former socialist revolutionary FMLN is now El Salvador's most left-wing political

party, providing an apt example of how co-operatives connect to larger socialist struggles for collective and equal control over resources.

### **Barrier one: challenges to enforcing honduran co-operative law**

This paper opened with an introduction to the legal advances of the Co-operative School and INAM as they relate to Honduras's Co-operative Law (see page 7) (Secretaría del Estado [*Secretary of State*], 2014a, 2014b). Despite these legal achievements, there remain challenges to realizing women's legal equality at the level of co-operative bylaws. Work on this front was mobilized in part from a pan-Latin American Swedish Cooperative Centre (SCC) study conducted in 2008 on the impact of co-operative laws and bylaws on women's co-op membership and leadership. In the SCC assessment of Honduras, no co-operative bylaws were found to have incorporated the legal guidelines established by national gender equality laws or international gender equity treaties such as the Convention against all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to which Honduras is party (Carlestam & Lukschandl, 2008, p. 13-14; also interviews B, C).

Another finding of the SCC study was that there were no articulated standards in the sampled co-operative bylaws in Honduras that explicitly promote women's co-operative membership and participation (Carlestam & Lukschandl, 2008, p. 13-14); so while the membership bylaws were written to be 'gender neutral,' the effects of these bylaws were not gender neutral (interview A). Ms. Cruz and Ms. García emphasize the issue in co-operative bylaws of direct and indirect membership, whereby men are often considered direct beneficiaries as the 'head of household' and women are considered the indirect beneficiaries that supposedly benefit from an assumed 'trickle down' of co-operative dividends and other membership benefits via their male co-op member partners (interviews B, C). Ms. García further explains that when agricultural co-ops have the option of a mixed group membership, "out of 30 group member representatives, three would be women" at a co-op's annual general meeting (interview C). Ms. Cruz summarizes the challenge: to find a way "to promote more substantively equal partner memberships" (interview B). The impact of low integration of gender equality principles in co-operative bylaws is demonstrated by GDF's study of women in Honduran coffee co-operatives, which found that women make up 45 percent of co-op workers, yet only 10 percent of decision making positions and none of the head positions of major coffee co-operatives (2009, p. 22).



In response to these findings, national women's co-operative organizations in solidarity with international partners campaigned for co-ops to allocate specific funds for the establishment of women's committees mandated to enforce gender equity principles in co-operative bylaws and practices (interview A).<sup>11</sup> Lukschandl argues that the establishment of women's committees stems from the feminist recognition that "women need safe spaces to develop their skills and arguments to address problems" (interview A). Women also responded to enduring low leadership participation rates of women co-op members by advocating for affirmative action such as quotas to increase women's representation in co-operative leadership (interviews A, C, D; Government of Chile, 2015, p. 16).

While these strategies to, in a sense, 'feminize' co-operative bylaws by creating a structure that facilitates more targeted access for women's co-op participation, they have had limited success insofar as women's unequal access to land remains a structural barrier to co-op membership. Therefore, complementary to Decree Law No. 34-2000, the coalition of women's co-operative organizations further pressured for co-ops to stop imposing land titles as requirements for co-operative membership since women are unfairly disadvantaged by these membership criteria due to patriarchal inheritance norms and lack of equitable access to financing to buy and develop land (interviews A, B, C). In addition to pressuring for the elimination of this indirect discrimination in co-operative membership bylaws, *La Vía Campesina's* approach to this issue was to campaign for a new *Agrarian Reform Law for Gender Equity, Food Sovereignty and Rural Development* proposed in April 2014. This law was designed to mainstream a socialist feminist approach to women's rural empowerment by positioning women's rights struggles at the heart of anti-corporatist food sovereignty politics through an explicit affirmation of women's rights to land and equitable financing, especially for marginalized groups such as single mothers (interview B). Despite national mobilizations in support of this new law, it has yet to pass in the Honduran Congress (Telesur, 2014; interview B).

For now, it seems that the context of a weak and repressive legal and democratic system has greatly limited opportunities for women's advancement through legal means in Honduras (INAM, 2010, p. 9). INAM concurs with this analysis, noting that although advancement has been made in the legal and public policy sphere, key challenges remain in advancing women's social, political and economic conditions in relation to men, due in part to the limited resources put forward by the Honduran government for the implementation of national gender policies (INAM, 2008, p. 9; GDF, 2009, p. 16). In other words, the enduring

challenge for the women's co-op movement in Honduras is to translate legal equality into social equality. As Verónica Sánchez Olguín, the Gender Equality Representative of the National Cooperative Federation of Mexico, put it: "we are facing a challenge of cultural reconfiguration that transcends the existence of laws, policies, standards, regulations" in Latin America (2014, p. 8). Indeed, "the road between recognition and exercise of rights is yet a long one that implies redefining the human configuration separating women and men" (Sánchez Olguín, 2014, p. 4). The project for a feminist cultural reconfiguration among Honduran co-operative governance structures is the second pillar of action and analysis the research participants focused on, exposing both the enduring challenges and the strategies of resistance that women have employed to enhance their opportunities for empowerment through co-operatives in Honduras.

### **Barrier two: Resistance to structural reconfiguration of agricultural co-operatives**

In addition to legal challenges to women's co-op membership and empowerment, one of the major themes running through the interviews was the enduring *machista* culture of agricultural co-operatives that has the effect of excluding women from co-operative decision making structures (interviews A, B, C, D). In contrast to the traditional image of the subservient woman in the private sphere, interviewees described a negative image of women in political and financial power at the co-operative governance level, where the "male leadership interprets the claims of women as attempts to divide the [co-operative] movement" (Government of Chile, 2015, p. 14). In other words, women who are active in co-operative governance are framed as destabilizing threats to spaces where men are used to making decisions, rather than as added valuable assets to the co-operative (interview A; Moberger, 2010, p. 7). Although certain pioneering women such as María Alvarado of the co-operative Honduras Aguán broke the glass ceiling of women's co-operative leadership (interview C), Lukschandl notes that "men have to vote for women to get into power, so that is where gender discrimination has a real effect" (interview A).

The research participants attributed this negative stereotype of the 'ruckus woman' as one of the reasons for the lack of action of agricultural co-operatives to redact land tenure in their membership bylaws, as well as for resistance to gender-equity principles and programming in some agricultural co-operatives (interview B). Overall, the outcome of these structural limitations that are backed by *machista* attitudes towards women co-op members has been the enduring ratio of less than 20 percent of co-operative leadership positions held by women in primary through tertiary levels

of Honduran agricultural co-operatives (interview C). Given these outcomes, Ms. Argueta concludes, “co-ops are an imperfect model for women’s empowerment” (interview D). However, she maintains, “with adaptation, they are still the best option for women to strengthen their productive capacities and collective contributions” (interview D).

Recognizing the need for cultural reconfiguration in agricultural co-operatives, FORCOC’s masculinity workshops are designed to facilitate this adaptation process at the associational level by reframing women’s co-op participation and leadership as valuable and complimentary to men’s co-op participation (interview A). FORCOC and the Cooperative School also offer technical and business development workshops for women co-op members to enhance their capacity to contribute to co-operative production (interviews A, C). While these strategies follow a GAD line of increasing women’s political and economic opportunities, the interview participants were equally adamant that cultural reconfiguration at the home level is key to addressing women’s barriers to empowerment (interviews A, B, C, D). By acknowledging that increasing women’s economic participation in co-ops may not make women better off without also addressing the unequal burden of reproductive work in the private sphere, participants also demonstrate a critical socialist feminist lens of analysis and action. The subsequent section will elaborate on their efforts and the persistent challenges to gender work at this micro-level.

### **Barrier three: Gender conflict in the home**

At the household level, the research participants argued that women co-operative members sometimes confront resistance to participating in co-operative governance activities from their partners due to *machista* attitudes towards them. Traditionally, in addition to co-operative participation and other productive activities outside the home, women are expected to carry the majority of the burden of caregiving and housework, creating a triple burden of work that is taxing for women who are heavily involved in their co-operative or other community projects (interviews A, B, C, D). Furthermore, if housework does not get done on account of their community participation, some women have experienced conflict and sometimes violence from their partners (Moberger, 2010), who may not see care work as a male responsibility (interview A; Government of Chile, 2015, p. 14). Moberger emphasizes that in “work for gender equity, when the purpose is to change the power relations, it is necessary to have a conflict perspective” (2010, p. 19) that acknowledges how gender-based household conflicts “can be explicit or implicit, in the form of various

types of violence or techniques of domination” (2010, p. 19). These individually experienced burdens and conflicts related to gendered power struggles in the household care economy have a direct effect on women’s bodily health and integrity and lie at the heart of many women’s larger struggles for equality in Honduras.

To address this base issue, the research participants stressed the need for men’s attitudes to shift towards valuing the care economy. This is both a feminist and anti-capitalist shift because the value of reproductive work is in its contribution to the sustenance and vitality of life, making “life...the currency of the care economy, not the accumulation of capital” (interview A). Interestingly, research participants found that although women receive rights-based training through the Co-operative School, FORCOC, *La Vía Campesina* and other gender programs, negotiations with their partners using the language of the care economy seems to receive less backlash from male co-operative members than a rights-based approach has in the past (interviews B, C, D). Participants maintained that a rights-based gender education is important for women’s personal autonomous development and solidarity building. However, gender programming that involves men is now often framed using the care economy as a point of departure for deconstructing the gendered division of labour and for restructuring more equal gender relations in the home because it is inherently inclusive and seemingly less confrontational than a rights-based approach (interview D). This insight is valuable to other social organizations that work on mixed gender programming for gender equity.

In summary, male-bias in co-operative membership laws, in co-operative governance structures, and in the household ‘care economy’ were identified by research participants as the three main barriers to women’s empowerment through agricultural co-operatives in Honduras. The research participants identified strategies to address these barriers that include: advocating for the elimination of direct and indirect gender discrimination in co-operative laws; establishing separate women’s organizations and women’s committees in co-operatives; providing financial resources and technical and business training for women co-op members; delivering women’s rights workshops and masculinity workshops to co-op members; and networking with other women’s organizations nationally and internationally. While there remain considerable gender gaps in terms of co-operative membership, participation, and distribution of benefits, there have also been important successes. Recent Honduran co-operative successes include the inauguration of gender equity principles into the *Honduran Co-operatives Act* in 2014, as well as the mobilization of over 200 women who have now graduated from the Co-operative

School and who are leading co-operative reform efforts across the country (interview A). With this summary and analysis of the research findings, the final section discusses the limitations of the research and offers suggested directions for future research that may be able to add further insight into enabling structures and programming that can support women to become equal and active members of their co-operative.

### **Limitations**

While the findings of this study connect to broader themes in Latin American women's movements (Carlestam and Lukschandl, 2008; Moberger, 2010, p. 24; Government of Chile, 2015), the generalizability of the findings of this study are limited by the shortcomings and inherent biases of a small sample of primary data gathered through the snowball sampling method. These limitations were mitigated with the incorporation of quantitative studies as well as a wide variety of literature on women in the co-operative movement in Honduras and in Latin America more generally, which served to both corroborate and contextualize this paper's analysis. Given these mitigation measures, the chosen research methods were selected as the most efficient and effective way to gain situated insights and widely applicable lessons from female leaders in the co-operative movement.

Some suggested areas for further research that were beyond the scope of this paper to explore include a more focused and detailed study into women's experiences in Honduras's land conflicts and democratization movements. Current coverage of these topics, while often incorporating the language of class conflict (Freeston, 2015), sometimes fails to add a gendered lens of analysis, thereby assuming that men's and women's experiences in these movements are the same or only nominally different (Lorber, 2010, p. 51). This paper did not delve into the effects of Honduras's militarization on violence against women, for instance, which is another dimension of women's struggles for empowerment that deserves focused attention. It is the hope that this study can both contribute to building a gendered narrative of the co-operative movement as well as offering some points of departure for more nuanced and systematic research and analysis into the micro to macro levels of struggles for women's economic and social liberation in Honduras and elsewhere.

### **Conclusions**

This paper has demonstrated that the potential for co-operatives to empower women depends upon the cultivation of enabling ideologies and programming to challenge patriarchal cultural norms that underlie legal barriers and other structural obstacles to women's full

participation in co-operative development. Specifically, the research revealed how male-bias in co-operative membership laws, in co-operative governance structures, and in the household 'care economy' hinder the benefits of women's co-operative participation. With illustrations from the case of the Honduras co-op movement, research participants identified strategies to overcome these barriers at the legal, cultural, and individual levels using both a human rights and care economy approach to gender programming in the co-operative sector. The utilization of a feminist standpoint methodology in the analysis of the research findings was also effective for positioning women's struggles for empowerment in the co-operative movement within the multiple, overlapping political struggles for democracy, self-determination and human rights in Honduras and elsewhere in Latin America. These feminist programming and co-operative organizing lessons are widely applicable to women's organizations and co-ops around the world for their multiple points of entry into gender equity work.

In terms of theory, this case has demonstrated how an application of GAD and socialist feminist theory can be used to interrogate the paradoxes and potentials for the co-operative development model to empower women. GAD and socialist feminism frame women's struggles for equality in the co-operative movement as a multi-layered challenge to negotiate more equal distribution of economic and political resources with their male counterparts, while advancing the cause of co-operative development more generally. In this way, the theoretical frame complicates the potential of the co-operative model to empower women through their participation in capitalist relations, especially when those relations are not mediated by an equal gender transformation in the reproductive care economy of the household. While this paradox has delayed the realization of material equality for women in Honduras's co-operative movement and elsewhere, it may also put them in a unique position to infuse the care economy's ethic of care into the co-operative model.

Extending the care economy's "currency of life" value into the co-operative development model has the potential to complement more general struggles for land and food sovereignty in Latin America by problematizing the logic of co-operatives operating in a capitalist accumulation mode rather than a life-sustaining mode of production. It remains to be seen how these struggles for women's empowerment and co-operative development unfold as conflicts over land and political power continue.

### **Notes**

1. "Participation" in the co-operative context means that members are involved in all functions of co-operatives

including planning, decision-making, finance, production and management (CCA, 2014).

2. This paper adopts the Canadian Cooperative Association definition of “empowerment,” as follows: “Empowerment is about people... taking control of their lives; setting their own agendas, gaining skills, building self-confidence, solving problems and developing self-reliance. It is not only a collective, social, and political process, but an individual one as well – and it is not only a process but an outcome too” (CCA, 2014).
3. “Machista” is a Spanish word that broadly captures the idea of a “natural superiority and domination of men over women” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2015). It is crudely synonymous with “male-domination” or “patriarchy” in English.
4. “Campesino” means “peasant” or “farmer” in English. Female farmers are “campesinas.”
5. 70 percent of farmers hold 10 percent of the land in small-scale farms while 1 percent of the landowners — the landed oligarchy — hold 25 percent of Honduras’s arable land in enormous estates (USAID, 2011, p. 4).
6. The National Committee for Families of the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH) claims that over 4, 234 human rights abuses occurred in the first four months following the coup alone, including 21 extra-legal executions, hundreds of cases of injuries due to police and military beatings, and over 3000 illegal detentions of coup protestors (2009). Today, Honduras is known as the world’s most violent country outside a war zone, with 20,573 violent deaths during the first three years of the Lobo administration and a murder rate of 85.5 per 100,000 inhabitants (El Heraldo [The Herald], 2014).
7. In contrast to co-operative leaders being targeted and expelled during the 1980s dirty war, General Martínez’s close relationship with the country’s richest landowner Miguel Facussé is well known, demonstrating the long history of collusion between the country’s landed oligarchy and the military (Kerksen, 2013: 8).
8. In the Aguán region alone, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) recorded 53 recorded cases of peasant murders connected to land conflicts between 2009 and 2012 (2012).
9. Insight Crime reports that less than 1 percent of murders lead to conviction by Honduran authorities (Gurney, 2014; interview B).
10. La Vía Campesina defines food sovereignty as: “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.... It puts the aspirations, needs and livelihoods of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations” (2011).
11. At the national level, CONAMUCOPHL leads the enforcement of gender equality in co-ops (interviews B, C).

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## Appendix A

The Swedish Co-operative Centre (now We Effect) (2008) and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (BCIE) (2009) compiled the key institutional actors and legal instruments relevant to the Honduran co-operative sector and specific to women's empowerment in Honduran co-operatives. Some are referenced in the paper but a comprehensive list is provided in this Appendix (Carlestam and Lukschandl, 2008: 54-56).

### Key Honduran Cooperative Organizations

National, and selected sectoral and regional federations:

1. Honduran Cooperative Central (HCC)
2. Honduran Institute of Cooperatives (IHDECOOP) (BCIE, 2009: 34)
3. The National Council of Women Cooperative (CONAMUCOPHL)
4. Federation of Cooperatives for Agrarian Reform in Honduras (FECORAH)
5. Agricultural Services Cooperative Union (UNIOCOOP)
6. Honduran Association of Coffee Producers (APROHCAFE)
7. National Farmers' Association (ACAN)
8. Honduran Alliance Women Cooperative (ALHCOMUJER)
9. Central Cooperative Coffee of Honduras (Central)
10. Union of Cooperatives of the West Limited (UCDOL)

### The Legal Framework of Honduran Co-operatives

1. In 1923, it was first established in the Constitution of the Republic that: "It is the function of the State to promote the cooperative partnership" (BCIE, 2009)
2. In 1927, two articles are attached to the Municipalities Act aimed at promotion and implementation of cooperative societies (BCIE, 2009).
3. Cooperative Associations Act, March 13, 1954
4. Agrarian Reform Law, 1972, specifically articles 109, 137 and 138
5. Honduran Co-operatives Act, 1987, amended in 2014 (Secretaría del Estado, 2014a)
6. Modernization Act and the Agricultural Development Decree No.31-92 / 5, March 1992

Policies to Promote Gender Equality in Honduras, and specifically in the agricultural sector:

1. Law of the National Institute for Women, 1998
2. Policy for Gender Equality in Honduran Agriculture (PEGAH), 2000
- a. The Policy for Gender Equity in Agriculture provides gender guidelines for existing plans and policies including: New Agricultural Agenda (1998-2002); Plan for Strengthening Agriculture (PLANFOR 1996-2015); and the Social Policy for Food Security and Sustainable Rural Development (2013)
3. Law on Equal Opportunities for Women, 2000.
4. First and Second National Plans for Gender Equality (2002 and 2010)
5. Domestic Violence Act as amended, 2005
6. Creation of Municipal Women's Offices nationwide
7. Rural Women Program of the National Agrarian Institute
8. National Strategic Plan for Women in Co-operatives, developed by the National Cooperative Women of Honduras, CONAMUCOPHL, in June 2008