

NEGOTIATING SECURITY: GENDER, ECONOMICS, AND COOPERATIVE
INSTITUTIONS IN COSTA RICA

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Negotiating Security: Gender, Economics and Cooperative Institutions in Costa Rica

Costa Rica is heralded as a leader in social and environmental issues and an example of a successful development story. However, how does this singular narrative minimize the more complex lived experiences of people? I introduce nuances to the story of Costa Rica by centering the lived experiences of women, drawing on primary data from questionnaires and interviews, and situating my research within the long history of cooperatives in Costa Rica, to learn more about issues women face and opportunities these institutions may offer. When looking through the lens of everyday experiences, we see that despite the significant progress in creating a safe country for all, women still experience inequality, discrimination, and violence. My hope is by including women's voices, we move beyond the "single story" toward a more nuanced understanding of multilayered lives of Costa Rican women and an appreciation for the opportunities they seek and create.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION, STUDY AIMS, & METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Óscar Arias, the former president of Costa Rica and recipient of many awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize, visited the University of Oregon to deliver a speech at a PeaceJam¹ event in March 2017. In his lecture, which I attended, Arias spoke of his efforts to establish peace in Central America, working with country leaders in the region to reach agreement on the Esquipulas II Accords, which ended the armed conflicts in the region and called on all countries to limit the size of their armies, assure freedom of the press, and hold free and open elections.² He also spoke of the history of Costa Rica and its unique place within Central America and beyond, as a recognized leader in peace, progress, and positive development. At the end of his talk, Arias took questions from the audience. One of the last to speak was a young woman from Mexico who was concerned about the rights and safety of transgender women in Latin America. The following is their exchange.³

Young woman: “Thank you for signing the National Day against Homophobia in Costa Rica in 2008. That was a big step for countries in Latin America who do not really support our community. However, in Costa Rica there are still no specific protections for trans people, especially transwomen, and right now they are very vulnerable with a life expectancy of less than 35 years. I wanted to know what your thoughts are on this issue, or if you have a stance, and what you hope we start doing within Latin America to really stand up for our trans community?”

¹ The PeaceJam Foundation is an international organization whose mission statement is to create young leaders committed to positive change in themselves, their communities, and the world through the inspiration of Nobel Peace Laureates who pass on the spirit, skills, and wisdom they embody. They have a chapter at the University of Oregon that hosts inspirational speakers each year (<http://www.peacejam.org/media/1222/peacejam-case-statement-2016.pdf>)

² Department of Sociology (2017). PeachJam 2017: Nobel Peace Laureate Oscar Arias. University of Oregon. <https://sociology.uoregon.edu/2017/03/06/peacejam-2017-nobel-peace-laureate-oscar-arias/>

³ This telling of the exchange comes from the recording and notes I took while I attended this event on March 10, 2017 at the University of Oregon in Eugene, OR, USA.

Arias: “Unfortunately I cannot speak for your country, but in my country, there is no discrimination. It’s not easy but we’ve been pushing legislation so that there is no discrimination.”

Young woman: “But currently there is no language or legislation that specifically protects transgender people.”

Arias: “In Costa Rica we don’t discriminate against religion or sex. We have more refugees than the United States, who come and enjoy our social systems, who get free education and free health care. We don’t discriminate against anybody.”

Young woman: “So are you saying the trans people in Costa Rica are not in danger of being murdered, raped, injured...?”

Arias: “No, no ... but you said that the life expectancy is 35 years - in our country the life expectancy is 81 years, much higher than in this country.”

And with that, Arias turned and walked back to the lectern, effectively ending the conversation and his talk for the evening.

I was very much struck by this exchange as I had just previously returned from conducting field research in Costa Rica where I spoke with many women who identified issues such as discrimination, inequality, and rigid gender ideologies as being prevalent in the country. I was surprised by the defensiveness and unwillingness of this admired and respected world leader, in a position of power, to acknowledge there was any sort of problem or to stray even slightly from the dominant story of Costa Rica in the face of a specific concern.

I present this exchange as an illustration of what is to be examined in this master’s thesis paper; how the dominant story of Costa Rica overlooks, undermines, and erases the reality of women’s everyday lived experiences. In so doing, this erasure may allow for the continuation of attitudes, expectations, and a culture that perpetuates many of the social and economic problems women report experiencing, despite the progressive policies the country has implemented. I also examine the ways that Costa Rican women

seek out and create opportunities for themselves and their families through community cooperative associations. While I rely on many reports and articles from international organizations, historians, and scholars, I also look to the expertise of the women in Costa Rica whom I stayed with and interviewed, in order to bring their voices, experiences, and knowledge into the story of Costa Rica. In the following sections I outline the study aims and methodology.

Study Aims & Methodology

The aims of this study include (1) learning from women what issues they identify as being the most pressing for themselves and Costa Rican women in general, and (2) understanding how, and with what outcomes, women engage with local women-led community organizations (such as cooperative associations). To explore these study aims, my primary research methods were qualitative and grounded in feminist approaches. I was interested in ethnography, the study of social interactions and perceptions based on detailed data gathered through fieldwork, because it is meant to provide “rich, holistic insights into people’s views and actions” (Reeves, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008), and by going to Costa Rica and talking directly with local women, I felt I could best gain important insights into their perspectives and ideas about my research questions.

As someone who has long been interested in gender issues, I was also drawn to feminist research approaches that call for the investigation and understanding of women’s own experiences, such as those described by Stanley & Wise (2002), in which they assert that, “what is needed is a woman’s language, a language of experience ... [which] must come from our exploration of the personal, the everyday, and what we experience – women’s lived experiences” (Stanley & Wise, 2002, 146).

Similarly, feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe calls for a “feminist curiosity” which she explains as a questioning of things normally taken for granted and an exploration of women’s experiences. “Using a feminist curiosity,” she explains, “is asking questions about the condition of women...it motivates one to treat as puzzling the relationships of women to any aspect of social life and nature that other people take for granted” (Enloe, 2007, 10). Additionally, in line with the work of Braun, I use an intersectionality framework to explore how Costa Rican women and their experiences, though different, share many commonalities in the ways social structures, gender ideologies, and state policies shape their everyday lives (Braun, 2005a, 2005b, 2011). Guided by these feminist ethnographic research methodologies, I center the lives of women to learn more from them about the economic and social issues they face and the ways they are navigating within the constraints they experience (Braun, 2008; Braun & Sylla, 2015).

I had not previously been to Costa Rica but was interested in the country because of its reputation as being an anomaly in the region; the “Switzerland of Central America” as it has been called (Palmer & Molina, 2004, 99). I wanted to learn more about this idea and hear from local women if this story is their reality. I have also been interested in the cooperative movement for some time, and Costa Rica has a long history of cooperatives, including many women-led cooperative associations. I decided to use cooperative associations as the sites for this study for three reasons. First, I was interested in the cooperative model as a possible alternative to capitalist, neoliberal development models and as a place where women have found economic opportunities. Second, by visiting cooperatives I had a mechanism through which to connect with local women and hear about their experiences and views on economic and social issues. Third, I had a contact at

a cooperative in the country who agreed to let me conduct participant observations and interviews on-site and who had also set up a homestay with a local family. From this starting point, I could then connect with other women's cooperative institutions in the country to conduct additional interviews.

Research Methods

I conducted fieldwork in Costa Rica over five weeks between December 2016 and January 2017. I collected qualitative data through participant observations, structured questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews with participants at cooperative associations or in the homes of women I stayed with as I traveled throughout the country. I used fixed but open-ended questions in the format of a questionnaire in order to give women room to answer more freely than a survey, while still allowing me to compare women's answers across the same questions. In situations where I had not prescheduled an interview and I was meeting a participant for the first time, or in situations where women did not have an extended amount of time to participate in an interview, I used these questionnaires. To address possible language barrier issues, I used questions written in Spanish and I administered questionnaires in the format most convenient for participants – some preferred to complete them electronically on their phone or my computer, others preferred that I read the questions and enter their responses.

In addition, I also conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participants I had prearranged interviews with, as well as with a subset of the women who had first completed questionnaires. Due to this, there was some overlap in women who completed questionnaires and interviews, and there were some participants who only completed a questionnaire or only participated in an interview. By using questionnaires

and in-depth interviews I was able to gather rich data. By the end of my 5 weeks in Costa Rica, I had begun to hear recurring stories and experiences from women throughout the country.

My analysis of the qualitative data from questionnaires, observation notes, and interviews took place in the following steps. I first compiled all participants questionnaire responses into a single spreadsheet with each row a participant and each column the responses for that particular question. I transcribed all recorded interviews and then added interview participants and their responses to the spreadsheet, sorting these by their relationship to the questionnaire questions and content. I also reviewed and entered relevant field notes into the spreadsheet. Next, I went through all of the entries in the spreadsheet and identified trends and pulled out recurring key words and themes across participant responses and notes. I coded key words and themes and then connected these into 4 major categories of themes. I also compiled simple prevalence statistics with the phrases and themes that emerged from this coding.

For this study, I followed the guidelines outlined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Human Subjects Protocol. I reviewed consent forms and received consent from all study participants who agreed to participate in any aspect of my study. All participant names associated with the data have been changed to maintain anonymity.

Study Participants & Settings

I used purposive sampling techniques (Berg, 2009) to select participants for this study. I was broadly interested in women's issues and in cooperative associations in Costa Rica. My aim was to learn from women what issues they find most pressing and to learn more about their experiences engaging in economic activities in general and in cooperative

associations in particular. To this end, I sought out women who were entrepreneurs or were involved in local cooperative associations.

I had a total of 18 participants (17 women and one man) in this study. Of these, 14 women completed questionnaires while 9 women and 1 man participated in interviews.

There was some overlap, with 6 women completing both interviews and questionnaires.

Study participant ages ranged from 19-72 years (Figure 1) and they held a variety

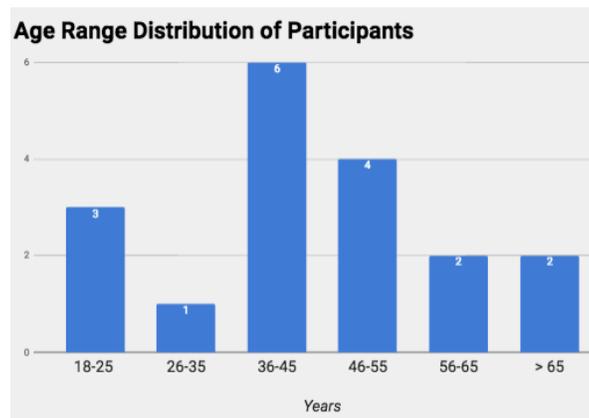


Figure 1: Age distribution of study participants

of employment positions. Three women worked inside the home; twelve women and one man worked in paid positions outside the home in a multitude of professions (including cook, supervisor, manager, director, teacher, small business owner, laborer, or farmer); and two women had worked in paid positions outside the home previously but were now retired. Three women were single, one woman was divorced, and 14 participants (13 women, 1 man) were married. Of the 18 participants, four (3 women and 1 man) had attained education beyond high school. While I did not specifically ask a question about how people identified their race/ethnicity, my sample did not seem to be racially diverse. Due to time and money constraints, I was not able to visit the eastern/Caribbean side of the country which has a distinct history and demographic, with a large proportion of the eastern region's population being of African and Caribbean descent. While this constraint

limits the diversity of my sample, I tried to vary other aspects of participant demographics for a more diverse sample population. This included sampling a variety of areas from north to south in the western portion of the country, visiting both urban and rural areas, and sampling women from a variety of ages and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Figure 2 below shows my study sites plotted on a map of Costa Rica. These sites included: a small town where I stayed with a host family and completed observations, questionnaires, and interviews at a coffee cooperative association (Site 1), a small but popular and busy tourist town where I interviewed the director of a women's artisan cooperative association (Site 2), a very remote and rural area in the far southern part of the country where I conducted observations and interviews at a women's coffee cooperative association (Site 4), another remote and rural area where I interviewed a woman who owned and operated the only store in the area (Site 8), three different areas on the peripheries of the capital city (Site 3 where I interviewed the director of a small women's horticulture and craft cooperative association, Site 5 where I stayed with a local woman and conducted questionnaires and interviews, and Site 7 where I also stayed with a local businesswoman who completed a questionnaire), and finally in the capital city where I stayed with another local businesswoman who completed a questionnaire (Site 6). In the following sections I first describe the cooperative associations I visited and the participants at each of these. I then describe the additional sites I visited as I traveled between cooperative association settings.



Figure 2: Study Sites Visited (cooperative & other settings)

Cooperative Association Settings

Coopesarapiquí

San Miguel de Sarapiquí is a small town of about 3,000 people located roughly 40 miles north of the capital city, San Jose (Figure 3). Prior to my arrival in-country, I had been in contact with the Director of a local cooperative, Coopesarapiquí, who arranged my 9-day homestay with a local family and allowed me to volunteer at the cooperative to gather data for my project.



Figure 3: Cooperative Study Site 1- San Miguel de Sarapiquí

Coopesarapiquí is a coffee cooperative whose membership is made of 137 small coffee farmers in the area. It began in 1969 when forty farmers came together seeking a more economically beneficial way of selling their coffee. They found that they could get better prices for their products through the cooperative model while promoting solidarity, mutual help, and giving back to their community. Coopesarapiquí does this by seeking new markets for their coffee, gaining distinctions such as Fair-Trade certification, and diversifying the products it sells. The cooperative has recently partnered with OXFAM on a project growing and selling Fair Trade certified yucca chips, and they are working with local cacao farmers to help sell their products to chocolate producers. Additionally, the cooperative has been steadily expanding its tourism activities. It now operates a restaurant and gift shop and conducts daily coffee tours (Figure 4). Four years ago,



Figure 4: Photo of Restaurant and Gift Shop of Coopesarapiquí (Cooperative Study Site 1)

Coopesarapiquí partnered with an international tourism company to help promote these activities. In that period, they have seen the number of visitors increase dramatically, from 1,130 people in 2012, to 4,523 in 2016 resulting in a significant increase of revenue from US \$24,930 to US \$131,973 in the same period of time, making tourism one of the most important parts of their business.

The cooperative continues to be active in the community, providing employment for 15-20 local people, funding local schools to help with supplies, and partnering with two women's organizations to offer support as they establish businesses. One group is starting a small factory producing herbal soaps and shampoos and Coopesarapiquí helped with funding for the machinery needed in the factory. The other group is running a small recycling business and the cooperative provides large trucks for transporting the recyclable materials to the closest center where the women sell the recyclables to earn an income for their families.

During my stay in San Miguel de Sarapiquí, I conducted participant observations, questionnaires, and interviews while volunteering for 8 full days at Coopesarapiquí, doing a variety of activities. I volunteered in the kitchen, working with two women who are employees of the cooperative. During this time, I collected questionnaire data from one of these women. I also conducted participant observations in the cooperative's storefront/souvenir shop and while assisting on coffee tours with two different tourist groups. In addition, I interviewed a woman who was the manager in the Tourism department; I interviewed one of the cooperative's oldest members (a local coffee farmer); and I traveled with one of the English-speaking employees to interview a woman from the shampoo factory and a woman from the recycling center (the two businesses being supported by the cooperative mentioned above). To gain additional insights about Costa Rican women's thoughts and experiences in general, I also completed questionnaires with 4 women during my home-stay in San Miguel de Sarapiquí.

CASEM (Cooperativa de Artesanas de Santa Elena y Monteverde)

Monteverde, a tourist town of about 7,000 people situated in the famous Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, a biodiverse, high-altitude rainforest that is literally “in the clouds” much of the time (Figure 5). Known for its abundant wildlife and plant species, people

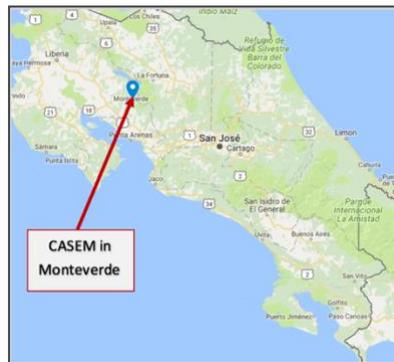


Figure 5: Cooperative Study Site 2 - CASEM (in Monteverde)

come from all over the world to hike through suspended bridges that allow for views of the forest from above the canopy. There are also many environment-focused organizations in the area conducting research, carrying out reforestation projects, and providing education on sustainable management practices. One organization, the Monteverde Conservation League, helped create Costa Rica’s largest private nature reserve in the area, called the Children’s Eternal Rainforest, which covers 54,000 acres (Monteverde Info, 2011). Monteverde is a remote town with dairy farming, agriculture, and tourism as its major industries.

I visited Monteverde because the women’s cooperative, Cooperativa de Artesanas de Santa Elena y Monteverde (CASEM), is located there and after reading about the cooperative’s history, I was interested in learning more about their work. I stayed with a local family who knew the Director and they were able to arrange for me to interview her.

CASEM was founded in 1982 by a group of eight women who were looking for ways to improve the economic situations for themselves and their families. This group of women was led by Patricia Jiménez, who had gone to college in San Jose and “came back with a mindset very different from a lot of women who had grown up [there]” (N. Gómez, personal communication, December 20, 2016). Jiménez organized with women to create artwork they could sell to tourists visiting Monteverde, first in her kitchen and then later in their own store (Figure 6). The women turned the cooperative into a flourishing business and there are now about 100 members selling their products. Not

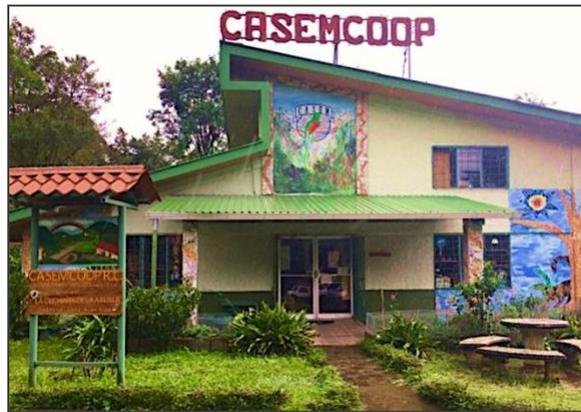


Figure 6: Photo of CASEM (Cooperative Study Site 2)

only does the cooperative allow for women to earn an income while working from home, but it also promotes continuing education, providing trainings for women in new art techniques and in business management skills, as well as hosting workshops in problem solving, conflict resolution, and confidence building (Leitinger, 1997; Monteverde Info, 2011).

AMASIA (Asociación de Mujeres Artesanas San Isidro de Atenas)

The Asociación de Mujeres Artesanas San Isidro de Atenas (AMASIA) is located San Isidro de Atenas, a fairly large suburb outside of San Jose. There, I met with AMASIA's co-founder and director, Ana Lucia Fernandez, for a tour and an interview.



Figure 7: Cooperative Study Site 3 - AMASIA (in San Isidro de Atenas)

In 1993, AMASIA started as a small initiative to understand, learn, and disseminate crafts for women in the Atenas region of central Costa Rica, and later expanded into a productive women's organization specializing in horticultural activities. The women at AMASIA grow and sell specialty orchids, cacti and other ornamental plants used in landscaping. They also host tours of the nursery, hold cooking classes, and sell plants, food items, and members' artwork at local craft fairs. Today the women have over 1,000 plants including 34 different varieties of orchids and their nursery is one of the largest plant conservation initiatives in the Atenas area. The organization provides a supplemental income for the nine women involved, as well as offering a space for community building and friendship.

ASOMOBI (Asociación de Mujeres Organizadas de Biolley)

The Asociación de Mujeres Organizadas de Biolley (ASOMOBI) is located in the very southern part of Costa Rica near the Panama border (Figure 8). I traveled to this very



rural area near the village of Biolley, to meet with
Figure 8: Cooperative Study Site 4 - ASOMOBI (in Biolley)

the Director of ASOMOBI. This organization was created in 1997 when a group of eight local women came together looking for solutions to the economic problems they faced. Until this point there were very few jobs in the area and the women stayed at home taking care of their homes and children. They wanted to start a business in order to earn additional money for their families. They tried many different things like arts and sewing projects, but found they were not making enough money as there were few customers in their remote village. There were many coffee farmers in the area, however, and the women decided to try a coffee roasting business. They learned through trial and error and now sell their specialty coffee in many businesses throughout Costa Rica and are hoping to expand into international markets in the future as well (S. Arauz, personal communication, January 3, 2017).

Today ASOMOBI is comprised of a group of 35 women who work on several projects. In addition to coffee roasting, the women keep bees and sell the honey, they make and sell jewelry and crafts in the main office of ASOMOBI, and they have expanded into the tourism industry, running a small hotel and restaurant on the site of the



Figure 9: Photo of Restaurant at ASOMOBI

roastery (Figure 9). To bring in additional tourists, ASOMOBI has collaborated with organizations working in the nearby park, La Amistad International Park, where they coordinate amphibian and bird watching tours for travelers who are accessing the park entrance close to ASOMOBI's offices (*Ibid*). I was able to interview the director of ASOMOBI and learn more about the organization through a tour of the grounds.

Other Research Settings

While traveling within Costa Rica to the different cooperative associations I visited, I also took advantage of the opportunity to meet and interview women with whom I encountered, particularly women who rented me a room while I was traveling between cooperative sites. I briefly describe each of these places below and the women I met there.

Ciudad Colón

Ciudad Colón is a relatively small town of roughly 10,000 residents, located about 12 miles outside of the capital San José (Figure 10). It is a quaint town, situated between two



Figure 10: Other Research Settings 1 - Ciudad Colon

mountain canyons. The University for Peace sits on one side of the canyon and brings in students from around the world to study at this United Nations mandated school. The town is also home to the Julia and David White's Artist Colony which hosts retreats for artists and musicians. Both organizations have attracted students from around the world who come to live in Ciudad Colón, adding a multicultural feel to the area. The downtown is filled with shops and restaurants, there is a large park with skating, sand volleyball courts, and seating areas for families, and there is a farmers' and artisans' market held in the central square on the weekends. There are also several upscale markets and other stores that cater to the many wealthy foreigners who now live in the town.

While in Ciudad Colón, I stayed for three days with a woman who was originally from the United States, but who had been living in Costa Rica for the past 28 years and had raised her two children there. I was interested in her perspectives as someone who grew up outside of the country but who had then raised her children and lived most of her adult life in Costa Rica. I thought she might have a unique view of women's experiences

in the country. She completed a questionnaire and also introduced me to her friend who is a teacher in the area. I met with the teacher to conduct an interview and she spoke with me about her experiences teaching both in San Jose and also in Ciudad Colón.

San José

San José is the capital city of Costa Rica and home to more than 300,000 people (Figure 11). It is the center of political and economic activity, with the seat of the national government located here as well as the headquarters of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. San José is also home to many schools, museums, theaters, parks, and universities, including the University of Costa Rica, and is a bustling, modern city (Municipalidad de San Jose, n.d.).



Figure 11: Other Research Settings 2 -
San Jose

I stayed briefly in San José between traveling to other parts of the country. I was hosted by a woman who ran a small business renting rooms out to travelers and students at the nearby college. She was married and had one grown daughter and I asked her to complete a questionnaire as I was interested in hearing her perspectives on women's issues as a woman, a mother, and someone who had access to younger generations of Costa Ricans through her contacts with college students.

Curridabat

Curridabat is a busy, upscale suburb close to San José (Figure 12) and home to many government buildings and offices, including foreign consulates and embassies. It also hosts the University of Costa Rica and is one of the oldest cities in the country.

Curridabat is home to many foreigners and the city has many beautiful houses and upscale shopping areas, restaurants, movie theaters, and artisan markets.



Figure 12: Other Research Settings 3 - Curridabat

I stayed with a local woman who owned a large home in an upscale neighborhood. She was married and the mother of one son, and she ran a small business renting rooms to travelers both short and long term. When I told her of my project she had a great deal to say about her thoughts on women's issues in Costa Rica – what she saw as problematic, her experiences as a small business owner and a woman, and her thoughts on solutions to some of the issues she outlined. She agreed to fill out a questionnaire for my project.

Aguas Buenas

Aguas Buenas is a very small village located about one hour south of San Isidro del General. Other than small homes and farms, there is one Pulperia (a general store) that has a variety of essentials you would need between trips to the larger towns. It is located

on a bus route which many of the village's people use to take into town. Aguas Buenas is the first stop the bus makes daily, in the early morning, and the last stop it makes every evening. I rode the bus into San Isidro del General, spending 2 hours each way with



*Figure 13: Other Research Settings 4 -
Aguas Buenas*

people from the local villages.

I was introduced to a woman named Mia from Aguas Buenas who runs the Pulperia (small grocery store). She worked there every day from early morning until late at night (with a lunch break for 2 hours in the middle of the day). Her home was located right next to the Pulperia and her three children came and went between the two, while her husband, a farmer, cared for the coffee they grow and the beef they raise on a small plot of land next to their home. The store that Mia runs is the only one for miles in this rural area, and as such it was a busy place where most of the locals visited on a regular basis. This suggests that Mia likely knows and interacts with a wide range of people and I was interested in speaking with her about her perspectives on what life is like for her and women in her area. Additionally, Mia also had a daughter and I was curious about her thoughts for her daughter's future.

In summary, I visited a variety of places within Costa Rica in order to get as much diversity as possible in my sample of women at cooperative associations and women I met while traveling between cooperative locations. In the following section I lay out the organization for the rest of the paper before moving into my literature review and analysis of the data.

Outline

Using the insights and information gained from questionnaires and interviews with women, as well as a historical analysis of the creation of Costa Rica's story, in the following chapters I lay out a more nuanced account that highlights the often-missing voices of women and provides a counter-narrative to the dominant story of Costa Rica.

In Chapter II's review of the literature, I outline a brief history of development in Costa Rica and how this aided in the creation of their dominant story of exceptionalism. I also examine how this then allowed for the surreptitious passage of neoliberal reforms that undercut the very policies which supported the dominant story. I highlight this paradoxical nature by demonstrating how the narrative of exceptionalism persisted even when Costa Rica's policies became decidedly unexceptional compared to other Latin American countries. I explore the effects neoliberal policies have had on women in general and relate these to the experiences of women in Costa Rica.

In Chapter III, I explore the data collected from questionnaires and interviews with women regarding their experiences and issues they face. This data highlights the fact that for most women, gender ideologies constrain their choices and opportunities, even in a country thought to be more progressive and successful than many in the region. This chapter also points to women's reports of the pervasiveness of harassment,

discrimination, and violence, and women's limited efficacy in existing legal systems to support them. The chapter demonstrates the challenge of creating social change through policies and laws alone and calls for deeper cultural shifts that promote gender equity and equality.

In Chapter IV, I examine the data collected from my interactions with participants at cooperative associations. Through this data, I show that despite constraints that women face, they are also actively seeking out and creating opportunities for themselves and their families through these associations. This in turn has led to some small yet significant changes in the broader community.

In Chapter V, I conclude by relating the experiences of the women I spoke with to the larger story of Costa Rica, pointing out that despite the efforts and significant progress to create a safe and prosperous country for all citizens, Costa Rican women still experience many gendered issues that create roadblocks to the enjoyment of their rights as outlined on paper. This disjuncture between reputation and reality highlights the limits of international agreements in making a real impact in women's daily lives if they are not also rooted in changing structures, institutions, and the cultural fabric of life in Costa Rica. Despite Costa Rica's success, much more work must be done to enforce the laws and treaties they are party to and on a deeper level to overcome these entrenched gender ideologies and create real change.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE – COSTA RICA’S STORY

Introduction

In a 2009 TED talk, Nigerian feminist and author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speaks about “the danger of a single story,” saying its creation works to “show a people or a place as one thing, and only one thing, over and over again, [until] that is what they become.” Adichie describes how this single account flattens experiences and overlooks the multiplicity of layers that make up a person or a place. “The single story creates stereotypes,” she says, “and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (Adichie, 2009).

The story of Costa Rica is one that for many people invokes images of beautiful, white-sand beaches, dense tropical forests of deep jade, rainbow colored frogs and birds, and a serene, safe, and prosperous environment. The Ticos (term local people call themselves) regularly use the term *Pura Vida*, translated to “pure life,” as greetings in their everyday conversations; yet it also represents a deeper cultural concept, signifying a way of life that is relaxed and hopeful (Krause, 2012). Costa Rica is featured in travel magazines as a fantastic tourist destination and a place for wealthy foreigners to retire with its reputation for its peace, prosperity, and stability, setting it apart from many other Central American countries.

Costa Ricans enjoy a relatively high standard of living and a stable government, and the country has passed many progressive laws to protect its people and the environment. This has included strengthening efforts to provide education and health care for all, to protect natural resources, forests and wildlife, and to protect the Costa Rican

people. Regarding women in particular, the country has taken many steps to increase gender equality and protect women's human rights, passing legislative measures to include women in economics and politics, to protect them from discrimination and violence, and to provide institutional support for survivors of violence. Overall, Costa Rica has been held up regionally and globally as a progressive leader in social and environmental issues and is, in many regards, an example of a successful development project. However, when you focus solely on largescale, aggregated data and this dominant narrative, you miss the nuances and details of people's everyday lived experiences and perhaps silencing the voices of those for which the dominant narrative does not hold true.

In order to better understand and situate the voices of the women I spoke with, it is important to know a bit about the history of the country. This historical analysis points to the ways in which Costa Rica's unique development led to a belief in the notion of exceptionalism - Costa Rica as a country that is different, better, and that stands out in the region – and what lasting impacts this notion has had on national identity. It is also important to examine the changing economics of the country as it became increasingly connected with the global economy and assess the social impacts these changes have had. In the following sections I lay out this history and examine these effects, particularly as they relate to women in Costa Rica.

The Dominant Story of Costa Rica

Similar to Adichie's "single story," the term "master narratives," as coined by Jean-François Lyotard (1984), are the dominant stories in a society that serve as summaries of socially shared understandings (Campo-Engelstein & Meagher, 2011; Lyotard, 1984).

Master narratives are used to make sense of our experiences and serve as a filter or a cultural lens that “screens out certain events, people, and details, while focusing on and highlighting others” (Campo-Engelstein & Meagher, 2011, 100). As a filter, they also work to normalize and legitimize what is said and done by individuals (Lyotard, 1984).

One of the master narratives of Costa Rican identity is that of *exceptionalism*; the self-perception that Costa Ricans are different from and even better than those in the neighboring countries (Campo-Engelstein & Meagher, 2011; Morales-Gamboa & Baranyi, 2005; M. Seligson, 2001). Costa Ricans pride themselves on their high standard of living, their nonviolent traditions and efforts to bring peace to the region, their egalitarian principles, and especially on their longstanding democracy (M. Seligson, 2001). Of all the Latin American countries, Costa Rica is one of only two that is considered a “full democracy,”⁴ holding free and fair elections since 1953. The government abolished its formal army in 1949 and used those resources to invest in the people, providing universal healthcare and free and compulsory education. The country has also passed many progressive laws to protect its people and the environment, including strengthening its efforts toward gender equality and the protection of women's human rights.

With its consistently high rankings in many regional and global indices, Costa Rica's exceptionalism gets promulgated throughout the rest of the world as well. Considered an upper middle-income country by The World Bank, Costa Rica has experienced steady economic growth over the past 25 years, resulting in one of the lowest

⁴ “Full democracy,” as defined in a study by The Economist Intelligence Unit (EUI) for the BBC, is understood to be countries where civil liberties and basic policies are respected, including access to polls, electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, government functionality, political participation and a political culture which leads to the flourishing of democracy (Chamy, 2015).

poverty rates in Latin America. The country also enjoys one of the highest life expectancy rates, literacy rates, and per capita income levels in the region. The annual Social Inclusion Index (2015), which measures development using 22 different variables rather than the narrow measure of economic growth only, ranked Costa Rica fourth overall (behind Uruguay, the United States, and Argentina respectively). In several individual categories Costa Rica measured high as well, including number one in percent of its GDP spent on social programs, number one in access to adequate housing by gender, and consistently high (in the top 3 or 4) in political rights, civil rights, financial rights, and women's rights (Alidadi et al., 2015).

While these reports do highlight many of the strengths and successes of the country, backed by statistics and measures which are recognized around the world, they do not tell the entire story. As Adichie warned, and Campo-Englestein and Meagher point out, these “narratives derive their strength by masking evidence that runs counter to, or even contradicts, the main elements of the story told ... working to erase the presence of the opposite in Costa Rican society” (Campo-Engelstein & Meagher, 2011, p. 103). Looking again at the annual Social Inclusion Index (2015) report, there are several places where Costa Rica's success may overshadow problems it has, specifically when it comes to women and minorities. Statistics show them ranking much lower in LGBTQ rights, ethnoracial inclusion, civil society participation, personal empowerment by gender, and government responsiveness (Alidadi et al., 2015).

When looking at sex-disaggregated data for Costa Rica specifically, women measured lower than men in many areas, including in their financial inclusion, access to a formal job, perception of government responsiveness, and personal empowerment.

Women in the country earn 70 cents for every dollar a man earns, they face higher unemployment, and they lack job opportunities, especially in rural areas. Women in Costa Rica are generally relegated to low skill and low paying jobs that lack health insurance and they also often face prejudice due to maternity leave and child care issues (Arias, 2016d). These forms of discrimination are often compounded when looking at the issue through an intersectional lens. The concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of Costa Rica by the UN CEDAW Committee released in July 2017 acknowledges the concerns they have that women of Afro-descent, indigenous women, migrant and refugee women, female heads of household and women with disabilities all face intersecting forms of discrimination that continue to be a persistent problem for the country (Anders, 2017b).

In sum, Costa Rica is recognized regionally and globally as a progressive leader in social and environmental issues and is hailed as a great example of a successful development story. However, not unlike other countries considered developed, Costa Rican women continue to experience significant economic issues, and they face gender inequality, discrimination, and high rates of domestic violence despite efforts to create a safe and prosperous country for all citizens. Even as Costa Rica has lower numbers of femicides in comparison to other Central American countries, women in the country continue to be killed due to their gender and rates of other types of violence against women (VAW), may be rising as well (Anders, 2017a, 2017b; Lopez, 2014). At the same time, the number of incidents reported to authorities does not match the measured prevalence rates of VAW indicating that women may not always report the violence they face, and the number of cases dismissed by courts still remains high (Anders, 2017a;

Arias, 2016a; Observatory on Gender Violence against Women and Access to Justice, 2016a, 2016b).

All of this points to questions that arise when you look more deeply at Costa Rica through the everyday lived experiences of individuals. What do you miss when looking at the positive overall picture of aggregated statistics? How does Costa Rica's asserted story of success play out in the lives of individuals? Why is it that despite these measured and proclaimed successes women still experience high rates of discrimination, inequality and violence? In this paper I argue that the creation and perpetuation of the dominant story of Costa Rican "exceptionalism," through highly aggregated statistical measures at the national and international level, may work to keep this violence invisible. I also point out that even in the face of mounting evidence for the negative repercussions of neoliberalism, there may be pressure for Costa Rica to keep the dominant story intact in order to stay competitive in a global market – continuing to attract foreign capital, business, and tourists to the country. This pressure may also work to keep the violence women experience invisible as well. While Costa Rica has shown great care by passing laws and signing onto regional and international treaties aimed at reducing inequality and preventing violence against women, the disaggregated statistics and lived experiences of women show a different account. This larger story can erase the experiences of those that do not fit the narrative with serious consequences, possibly working to perpetuate the violence women experience.

The next sections provide a historical analysis of the creation of Costa Rica's dominant story and discuss the strains this narrative faced as the country shifted to

neoliberalism, before turning to a more focused discussion of women's experiences and the costs related to this shifting story.

Historical Context for the Creation of Exceptionalism

Much of what underlies the master narrative of Costa Rica has been explained by the “rural democracy thesis,” which argues that Costa Rican exceptionalism, adherence to democracy, and nonviolence can be traced back to factors that originate in the colonial period (Miller, 2012, p. 32). During this period, Costa Rica played a less significant role in the expansion of the Spanish empire, and was not colonized until 1560, four decades later than the rest of Central America. This lack of interest in colonization of Costa Rica was due in large part to a sparsely populated territory spread out over a rough terrain with no centralized authority, a relatively small indigenous population to utilize for labor, as well as limited natural resources in the country (Miller, 2012). All of this meant a relative lack of exploitable land, resources, and people, which resulted in a much different pattern and a slower rate of settlement that allowed Costa Rica to remain largely outside of the colonial power struggles happening in neighboring territories (M. A. Seligson, 2014; Morales-Gamboa & Baranyi, 2005). This also resulted in Costa Ricans developing a sense of independence and self-reliance which remained throughout the colonial period and beyond, creating a foundation for their narrative of exceptionalism (Rankin, 2012).

Mexico became independent from Spain in 1821 and then soon afterward the United Provinces of Central America, of which Costa Rica was a part, separated without violence from Mexico in 1823. Costa Rica briefly joined the newly formed Central American Federal Republic (CAF) with Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua (US Department of State, 2016). During this time, Costa Rica developed in

relative isolation from the rest of the CAF members for primarily two reasons – isolation and geography. In part, with Costa Rica being the southern-most country of the CAF, it was far from Guatemala, where the seat of colonial power had been at that time (M. A. Seligson, 2014). This distance allowed Costa Rica to concentrate its efforts on its own nation building - creating a national flag, a coat of arms, and incorporating many cities and towns (Miller, 2012). Costa Rica's isolation also meant it was not involved in the civil war activity taking place elsewhere in the region and was relatively unaffected by dictatorships and foreign invasions common elsewhere in Central America. During this time, while the region's other countries were mired in violence, Costa Rican leaders signed the Pact of Harmony, establishing an "itinerant government" which required its high officials to live in each of the country's four major cities for part of the year as a way to equally divide up the prestige and power of the government seats (Miller, 2012, 42).

As Seligson (2014) explains, geographic factors also accounted for Costa Rica's isolation and unique development, as its most populated towns were located high in the country's rugged central mountain range, far from either the Pacific or Caribbean coasts and far from Nicaragua or Panama. Due to the physical separation, rugged mountains, absence of significant mineral resources, and small indigenous populations, few Spanish colonizers were drawn to the country and the population remained relatively small. Those who did come to Costa Rica were mostly poor farmers who focused mainly on small-scale agriculture primarily for subsistence (M. A. Seligson, 2014). This was in contrast to other countries in Latin America where large latifundios were being established. These latifundios were a system in which large tracts of fertile land were divided up by Spanish

colonizers into estates controlled by elites and worked with the forced labor of indigenous populations (Lambert, 1974). In these early days in Costa Rica, without latifundios, there was a relatively more equal distribution of land with many small farmers working small plots of land primarily for their own consumption (M. A. Seligson, 2014).

The beginning of Costa Rica's story of exceptionalism began to take hold during this time as well, and its underpinnings rested on the country's isolation and unique development as was outlined above. Leaders were concerned with the violence and corruption that was taking place in other Central American countries during this development period and were worried that those behaviors might "infect" the "innately peaceful" Costa Ricans (Miller, 2012, 43). Miller's quote from an unnamed politician in 1830 shows the narrative of exceptionalism that was being established even then.

"Costa Rica has set a good example in every respect for the other states of the [CAF]. It is neither reasonable nor just that Costa Rica should now lose the beautiful prestige that it has earned through its constant vigilance in the protection of harmony, its exact adherence to the law, and its continuous repudiation of the partisan rows and personalist ideas that have been in abundant evidence in the other states" (Miller, 2012, 43).

When CAF collapsed in 1839, Costa Rica, who already had experience with local governance, was poised to govern itself, establishing what would become the oldest and most stable democracy in the region. Many credit this to the leadership of "fairly enlightened elites who developed stable political parties, fair electoral mechanisms,

public education, relatively benign security forces, and a culture of tolerance” (Morales-Gamboa & Baranyi, 2005, 236).

The late nineteenth century was a time of increasing prosperity in Costa Rica as coffee became an extremely important and profitable export into foreign markets. As demand for coffee grew in Europe and the United States more of Costa Rica’s land was put into cultivation (Rankin, 2012). This growing global coffee industry “served as a principal point of linkage to an expanding world economy” and a way for Costa Rica to become incorporated into those markets, effectively establishing an “outwardly focused” strategy of development for the country (Roseberry, 1995, 10). This trade also provided important insertions of wealth into Costa Rica and influenced the subsequent social progress of the country, transforming it from one of the poorest of the five in Central America to a more modern, European-influenced society (Instituto del Café de Costa Rica (ICAFFE), n.d.; Reding, 1986).

The shifting landscape within Costa Rica led to the establishment of a powerful coffee elite class in the country, but it was one that also depended on small-scale farmers for its success (Roseberry, 1995). In contrast to the large latifundio estates, which were based on the exploitation of the labor of poor peasants and indigenous populations by the wealthy landed elites, Costa Rica developed a two-tier system of small landowners who grew the coffee and a wealthy elite class of “cafetaleros” who owned the processors and means of exportation (Rankin, 2012). While this might have been a relatively less-exploitative situation, it was not free from strong power dynamics. The cafetalero class was comprised of the dominant, white aristocratic settlers and their families who were of “pure” Spanish or other European descent, who were able to amass even greater fortunes

and power through the coffee export industry (Rankin, 2012). At the same time, the indigenous population in the country was largely left out of this progress and faced significant discrimination and realization of any rights.

With the rise of this elite class, another element of Costa Rica's narrative of exceptionalism began to form. In what Theodore Creedman labeled "la leyenda blanca" or the "white legend," the self-image of Costa Ricans as being white, literate, peaceful, and civilized was promulgated by "relegating nonwhite groups to a lower social and legal status and by denying [any] non-white ancestry" (Campo-Engelstein & Meagher, 2011, 100). This myth ignored the history of enslavement of Africans and native populations in Costa Rica (Biesanz, Biesanz, & Biesanz, 1999) and belied the fact that nearly all Costa Ricans are of mixed ethnic descent (Campo-Engelstein & Meagher, 2011). As demonstrated by the Royal Geographical Society explorer, Frederick Boyle's (1868) quote, this story of exceptionalism was built on a foundation of whiteness, "Of the great and growing prosperity of the country there can be not a question at all ... I believe there is a cause for the tranquility of this country other than mere prosperity that is purity of population. Not in manners or morals but in blood" (Boyle, 1868, 218). Throughout the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s, coffee elites used this "white legend" to help consolidate their power and to reinforce the story of Costa Rica exceptionalism.

Although Costa Rica was relatively stable, these early times were not without incidences of social and political conflict. There were a few coups, some short stints under dictatorships, the resignation of an unpopular president, and in 1948 Costa Rica experienced a brief civil war in which 2,000 civilians died ("Costa Rica," 2018). The war ended with the drafting of a new constitution, which contained a number of significant

provisions within it. It included a set of social guarantees including a pledge that “the state will work for the greatest well-being of Costa Ricans, affording social protection to the family, the foundation of the nation, assuring aid to mothers and to children” (Honey, 1994, 134). It also established the rights of workers and trade unions, established women’s suffrage, abolished institutionalized racism, nationalized the banking system, asserted the right to live in a healthy natural environment, and permanently abolished the military, making it the first nation to ever do this by law (“Costa Rica,” 2018; Palmer & Molina, 2004). Without a military to finance, Costa Rica was able to investment in social welfare programs and protections for the people of Costa Rica (Braun, Dreiling, Eddy, & Dominguez, 2015), including universal access to education and health care, subsidized housing and minimum wage laws, and fair tax systems (Morales-Gamboa & Baranyi, 2005).

These changes, and the strong state-civil society relations they created, also strengthened the national sense of exceptionalism during this period, as Costa Rica projected itself to the world as a peaceful country committed to the wellbeing of all its people (Morales-Gamboa & Baranyi, 2005). It is important to note, however, that this narrative overlooked the indigenous peoples in the country who struggled (and continue to struggle today) to be recognized and given rights in a country that prided itself on taking care of “all people.” They did not gain the vote until 1994 and still face issues of poverty, properly funded education, and rights to their own land. While this already signals to the unevenness of Costa Rican success, additionally as will be laid out in the next section, the foundations of Costa Rican exceptionalism would also come under

intense strain as world powers of the global north along with elites in Costa Rica pushed a new form of economic policy on developing countries – that of neoliberalism.

Costa Rica's Shift to Neoliberalism and Weakening of the Welfare State

During the 1970s the world was suffering from cold war policies and economic crises created by oil shortages, and soaring interest and inflation rates. Countries were defaulting on their debts, and conflicts were breaking out across many parts of the world, including Central America. Although not directly experienced by Costa Rica, these conflicts affected the country, causing it to become more actively involved in foreign policy than it would have liked to be. In particular, Costa Rica was pulled into a complicated conflict between Nicaragua, the Sandinista revolutionary group working to overthrow the Nicaraguan dictator, and the United States who backed the Nicaraguan government against the Sandinistas (Campo-Engelstein & Meagher, 2011; Matrisciano, n.d.; Rankin, 2012). In the midst of this turmoil, Óscar Arias was elected president in 1986 after running on a platform of peace and leveraging Costa Rica's identity of exceptionalism during the tumultuous time. After his election, Arias worked tirelessly to broker a peace deal and end the civil wars throughout Central America. In 1987, he succeeded in getting the five Central American presidents to sign onto the Equipulas II Plan, which called for internal dialogue, limiting the size of armies, ending external support to insurgencies, and implementing democratization measures such as freedom of the press, and holding free and open elections. Arias was subsequently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 for these efforts in helping to bring peace to the region.

Celebration from the peace agreements brokered by President Óscar Arias were tempered by the instability in the global economic conditions of the 1980s that were

having increasingly severe impacts on Costa Rica. The country saw its revenues from exports plummet while the price of imports and oil sky rocketed, and its GDP and wages dropped at the same time that inflation and unemployment increased dramatically. The country had accumulated US\$4 billion in debt by 1983, one of the highest per capita debt balances of any country in the world at that time (Wilson, 1994). Costa Rica owed more than it could make payments on and was forced to implement Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the mid-1980s in order to avoid defaulting on its international loans (Miller, 2012; Morales-Gamboa & Baranyi, 2005). The SAPs, as well as a broader turn toward neoliberal economic policy, meant devaluing its currency, privatizing industries that had formerly been state run, and cutting social welfare programs and expenditures on education, health care, and housing. These austerity measures were a hard blow to Costa Rica, a country that prided itself on taking care of its people. John Biehl, an economist and advisor to President Óscar Arias, described the restructuring efforts pushed by foreign entities, particularly by USAID during this period as constituting “an American attack upon Costa Rica’s quiet socialism” (Marois, 2005, p. 113). Biehl went on to describe what he termed as the creation of a “Parallel State,” by the use of AID funds from the U.S., defining this ‘parallel state’ as “a set of AID-created and -financed private institutions which duplicated, undermined and weakened existing government institutions,” and Biehl explained that “Washington was trying to dismantle Costa Rica’s quiet socialism not by attacking it head-on, but by undermining it through a set of well-financed, competing private-sector institutions loyal to the United States” imposing “an economic ideology that ignores the underpinnings of Costa Rica’s stable and relatively egalitarian democracy” (Honey, 1994, p. 75). USAID began dramatically increasing its

funding to Costa Rica with dramatic effects on the country and its social contract with the people of Costa Rica.

In the five years between 1983 and 1987, the USAID program's assistance to Costa Rica jumped and the country received over \$1 billion more in AID support than in the previous three decades combined (Honey, 1988). During this period of increased funding, what initially started out as restructuring loans from USAID became grants. This deliberate change meant there was no longer a need for legislative approval of these funds coming into the country which effectively circumvented the democratic process and gave the U.S. government more freedom to set conditionalities on the funding it delivered (Marois, 2005). These conditionalities, attached to funding by USAID, aimed at pushing Costa Rica toward the privatization of state-run industries, which was to have major consequences for the country's identity and wellbeing.

Honey (1994) notes that the cornerstone of Costa Rica's unique social-democratic form of government was comprised of three interrelated things: the abolition of its army, the building of its social-welfare system, and its state-run banking system. The success of this system relied on the ability of the Costa Rican government to channel the funds it saved from abolishing its military, through its Central Bank, where it could then use that money to build its notable social welfare system. The state banking system also allowed the government to set up or buy a whole variety of enterprises, including electricity and telephone companies, a housing authority, and the National Production Council which established agricultural infrastructures and guaranteed farmers and consumers stable subsidized food prices. The number of autonomous state-owned institutions reached 182

by 1978 and these came under attack during the push to privatize in the 1980s (Honey, 1994). The first to be targeted was the national banking system.

Costa Rica's banks had been nationalized at the end of the civil war in 1948 and were seen as an incredibly important part of the underpinnings of their democratic society (Wilson, 1994). Many supported state-run banks, such as José Figueres, leader of the junta during the civil war, who argued that "the administering of money and credit ought not to be in private hands any more than the distribution of water and the mail," and he argued that with privatization bankers would be able to use their economic power to wield political power to their own advantage, rather than for the advantage of all Costa Ricans (Wilson, 1994, 155). However, according to USAID officials and those in Costa Rica who were supportive of the push to privatize, the state-run banking system was "plagued by political interference and inefficiency," "burdened with excessive regulations," and "suffered from processing delays, poor discipline, and lack of competitiveness" (Honey, 1994, 79), which is familiar language used in the fight for privatization. With alliances built between U.S. officials, powerful local businessmen, and sympathetic politicians, the promotion of private banks was positioned as the top priority, and USAID set stipulations on its funding so that large portions must go to private banks and private-sector enterprises. It also worked with its alliances in-country to push for legislative measures to severely undermine or get rid of state-run banks. One strategy used in the early 1980s in this regard was the tying of a \$300 million renewal of funds to the passage of bills set at dismantling the national banks. Without this funding there would be large layoffs of government employees and cuts to higher education and

government budgets, and though there was a great deal of resistance during the sixteen months that the bill was discussed, it was eventually passed (Honey, 1994; Isla, 2003).

According to Honey (1994) this resulted in the majority (80%) of the resources that were given to Costa Rica by USAID to pass directly to private banks. With very little funds left for the national bank and a shift to profits as the priority focus, the national bank lost its ability to undertake socially important projects that had been used historically for the more egalitarian development of the entire country. Honey describes this as the start of a “gradual transfer of power which worked in various ways to undermine the role of the state and with it the country’s social and economic stability,” and she notes that this shift “facilitated the concentration of wealth and the rise of an oligarchy of private bankers, large agricultural exporters, and industrialists who have been spoon-fed with AID funds” (Honey, 1994, 91).

Beyond the national bank, the push for privatization was extended to Costa Rica’s generous public health care system, which had been described as “the best and the most economical in the western hemisphere” (Honey, 1994, p. 141) and was extremely effective at ensuring the poor received the care they needed. USAID provided funding to support private-sector health care projects only and was very vocal about problems of efficiency, costs, and quality of a state-run health system, while at the same time touting privatization and decentralization as ways to overcome these problems (Honey, 1994). Additionally, state-held electrical, telecommunications, and water industries were targets for privatization as well. The Costa Rican Institute of Electricity (ICE) had been very successful at providing high levels of infrastructure, allowing for a relatively equal distribution of services which contributed to quality of life improvements for many of the

country's citizens (Sandbrook, Edelman, Heller, & Teichman, 2007). This state-run enterprise was seen as a potential source of large profits for private interests and the push to privatize these industries as well as the banks was pursued (Haglund, 2006). As Haglund (2006) explains,

“Though ICE's efficiency indicators were exceptional, prices were low, consumer satisfaction was relatively high, and the company was deemed a powerful motor of national development, it began to be reframed by certain actors as a burden on the state and a potential source of windfall income from its sale” (Haglund, 2006, p. 12)

In 1990 the electrical generation market was opened up to the private sector with significant impacts to Costa Rican people. The private companies set their prices using the United States consumer price index, which resulted in a substantial increase in rates with consumers oftentimes paying up to three times as much for their energy (Haglund, 2006). As Haglund noted, “Instead of fostering competition, this [move to privatize] institutionalized a regime of privilege in which a few companies, many of which were owned by the country's elite, enjoyed guaranteed success, with citizens absorbing the extra costs” (Haglund, 2006, p. 24).

In sum, the privatization strategy pushed in the 1980s and 90s also had significant ramifications for Costa Rica's governmental structures, succeeding in “permanently altering the economic structures on which Costa Rica's democratic institutions rest” (Honey, 1994, 76). These changes have impacted the foundations on which Costa Rica's dominant story of exceptionalism rests as well. Privatization has meant “not simply the dismantling of the state, but the redefinition of its functions” resulting in “setting this

historically unique country on a path toward becoming just another right-wing, politically pliant, economically dependent banana republic” (Honey, 1994, p. 76). Honey sums up this entire shift, saying,

“USAID and other US government funds were used to dismantle existing public institutions, to construct a pantheon of new, private organizations, and to bypass authorization and oversight by the Costa Rican government and legislature. The AID-created private institutions do not simply operate independently from the state sector; they also served to drain much needed financial and human resources away from already existing public institutions. By channeling resources to private institutions, forcing the dismantling of state enterprises, and withholding funds from important projects, AID and other US government programs helped to build up a privileged, powerful, and politically conservative elite while simultaneously weakening the economic underpinnings of Costa Rica’s social-welfare system and democratic institutions” (Honey, 1994, p. 104).

For Costa Rica, these were the beginnings of a bigger economic transformation that was occurring, as the country turned more fully toward the new economic policies of neoliberalism (Braun et al., 2015). This was also the beginnings of a restructuring of society and an increase in problems associated with the model that have called into question Costa Rica’s narrative of exceptionalism.

Effects of Neoliberalism and Increasing Problems with the Social Contract

As Costa Rica shifted toward neoliberal economic policies such as privatizing state-run industries, cutting government subsidies and taxes for the wealthy, dismantling trade unions and eliminating social safety nets for the poor, and opening its borders to the

movement of goods and capital, there have been a number of effects. While there has been an overall steady growth in GDP, the economy has seen increasing fluctuations and uncertainties. Larger, more powerful businesses have been able to take advantage of the export-oriented models enshrined in neoliberalism, whereas smaller ones have struggled and often gone out of business. At the same time, the central government has faced significant increases in debt, approaching its highest levels in the past 10 years, with much of this stemming from recurring expenses rather than any additional investments. This has created a situation where the government “has zero margin to confront the critical fiscal situation, with 95% of its expenses inflexible” and, “within this context, there is very little maneuverability for sustaining the public social investment growth” of the past (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016).

Additionally, the number of people employed has decreased with unemployment rates rising to 9.7% in 2016 (The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2016). Lack of employment has been especially significant for the poor, who also have the added hindrance of being disproportionately employed in the precarious informal sector which has resulted in many simply leaving the workforce altogether (The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2016). With rising unemployment, income inequality and poverty in Costa Rica have also begun to steadily increase as well. Despite growing prosperity in general, poverty rates have gone up by 20 percent and extreme poverty rates rising by almost 50 percent among the poorest groups between 1987 and 1991 (Isla, 2003). This poverty has persisted, remaining around 20-25 percent for the past 20 years and creating major challenges. These challenges include calling into question “Costa Rica’s historical commitment to

social solidarity” (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016) and they have presented a significant challenge to the country that has long prided itself on its egalitarian nature, demonstrated by the quote from former president, Miguel Ángel Rodríguez,

“This is a country of egalitarians (*igualados*). Costa Ricans do not accept that anyone is superior. We do not have the American celebration of success. We prefer to be loved—or liked—rather than successful. If someone is perceived to be acting superior we say, ‘the floor needs to be lowered’...” (Colburn, 2006, p. 354).

Many Costa Ricans share these thoughts as well, believing that at the root of Costa Rica’s success – its political stability, strong institutions, commitment to public welfare, education, and health of the population – is the country’s social equality (Colburn, 2006). As Colburn notes, “Costa Rica’s history is interpreted as having been conducive to the creation of a society—a nation—that was, at its core, egalitarian” (Colburn, 2006, p. 354). However, with rising poverty, inequality, and debt, these foundational beliefs have come into serious question in the neoliberal era.

While the preceding two sections have outlined some of the negative impacts neoliberalism has had on Costa Ricans in general, for the purposes of this project it is important to take a deeper look in order to get a more nuanced view of how women in particular have been affected by neoliberalism. It has been argued that neoliberalism can bring positive benefits to women – allowing them greater access to income opportunities and conversely, others argue that women have faced greater challenges under this economic philosophy. In the next section I explore these arguments in more detail.

Neoliberalism and Women

There is currently nowhere in the world where women have full equality in social and economic rights, or the same access to resources as men. This inequality has been linked to a whole host of significant issues that impact individual women and societies, including higher rates of poverty and unemployment, lack of access to health care, issues with water and food security, and higher vulnerability to violence (Lefton, 2013).

Proponents of neoliberalism suggest it is a way to improve women's equality, giving them greater employment opportunities and access to income, which can lead to increases in their social status, their health, and reduce their susceptibility to violence (Elborgh-Woytek et al., 2013).

There has been a great deal of support for the benefits neoliberalism can bring not only to individual women but to families, companies, and whole societies at large. The World Bank argues that increasing women's economic participation "contributes to faster economic growth, improves child survival and overall family health, and reduces fertility rates" (World Bank, 1994). Additionally employing more women can also significantly raise a country's GDP, and could help individual companies by increasing their profitability and productivity as "companies that invest in women's employment often find that it benefits their bottom line by improving staff retention, innovation, and access to talent and new markets" (O'Neil, 2013). And, the International Finance Corporation (2013) argues that "better jobs for women, including employment that leads to higher wages and greater decision-making, have a positive influence on the ways households spend money on children's nutrition, health, and education...and companies that invest in

women's employment gain an important competitive advantage" (International Finance Corporation, 2013).

For women, then, it seems that neoliberalism may hold great potential for their equality and empowerment – increasing their access to jobs, raising their economic and social status, while lowering their susceptibility to violence – all of which can have rippling positive effects throughout the greater society. While it is true that neoliberal policies have increased the number of paid job opportunities available to women, many scholars point to the negative impacts these policies have had on women as well.

In looking at the effects of neoliberalism on women, I turn to feminist frameworks as promoted by the political scientist Jacqui True who examines violence against women through a feminist political economy lens. I also draw from feminist philosophers who assert that focusing on specific global 'women's issues' as independent phenomena, fails to take into account the systemic and structural gendered injustices associated with neoliberalism, and instead we should focus more broadly on all global issues which typically have gendered dimensions (these include war, global governance, migration, southern debt, and climate change) (Parekh & Wilcox, 2014).

Feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar analyzes global economic policies through this feminist lens, understanding them in terms of the effects they have had specifically on women (Parekh & Wilcox, 2014). Jaggar argues that despite all the promises made for the neoliberal model, the results have not lived up to the rhetoric. She argues that instead of bringing universal prosperity and an end to poverty, there is a "rapidly widening gulf between rich and poor ... creating unprecedented wealth for a relatively few and poverty and destitution for millions" (Jaggar, 2001). She also notes the deterioration in

democracy and a turn toward authoritarianism and corruption, as well as an acceleration of environmental harm as consequences of this model.

While peace, prosperity, democracy, environmental conservation, and the elimination of racism and ethnocentrism seem to be gender-neutral ideals, Jaggar argues that each are also distinctively women's issues, saying,

“because all known societies are structured by gendered value systems, which assign unequal status and privilege to men and women, as well as to whatever is culturally considered masculine and feminine, most - if not all - social issues carry meanings and consequences for women that are somewhat different from those they carry for men. To the extent that global neoliberalism undermines women's special interests... it is a system hostile or antagonistic to women. Although neoliberal globalization is making the lives of many women better, it is making the lives of even more women worse. The lives of many of the world's poorest and most marginalized women in both the global South and the global North are deteriorating relative to the lives of better-off women and of men, and even deteriorating absolutely” (Jaggar, 2001, 301–302).

Looking specifically at the problems women have faced in this new economic system, we see that although they have been incorporated into formal, paid labor, their wages are still much lower than men's, their unemployment rates are higher, and they still carry the unequal burden of responsibilities outside of work (i.e. caring for children and the household, caring for sick or elderly). With these outside responsibilities, women are less likely to be able to work full-time, meaning they are more often relegated to precarious positions that are low paying and lack benefits or health insurance. It is now exceedingly

common for women to be working more hours for less money, to be caring for children alone, and to lack health insurance and access to affordable child care (Bako, 2011). In the United States alone, over half of all poor children (56.7 percent) live in families headed by single women (Eichner & Robbins, 2015). Globally, 14 percent (320 million) of children live in single-parent households, which are most often headed by single mothers (Chamie, 2016).

Because of the precarious situations women find themselves in as the effects of neoliberal policies play out, they are also those most negatively impacted by the cuts to social safety nets associated with neoliberalism. Reductions in government spending on public goods such as education, health care, and child care have negative impacts for women who rely on this when they are single parents or work in low paying jobs, which they more often do as compared to men. To try and make ends meet with fewer resources, many women have had to find alternatives; some of which include migrating to wealthier places in search of jobs, or finding work in the sex industry (Parekh & Wilcox, 2014). There have also been many studies arguing that women also face increasing incidences of violence as a result of neoliberal policies (Okin, 1998; Parekh & Wilcox, 2014; Weedon, 2002).

With diminishing economic security and increasing poverty, neoliberal policies have also exacerbated existing forms of gender discrimination and many women face increasing incidences of violence (Okin, 1998; Parekh & Wilcox, 2014; Weedon, 2002). Extreme examples of this violence have been seen in places like the Mexican border town of Ciudad Juárez, where the increasing numbers of murdered women have been linked to the shift to neoliberalism and the incorporation of women into cheap factory jobs in the

city since the 1990s. Of these increasing killings of women, Jessica Livingston (2004) states, “The construction of working women as “cheap labor” and disposable within the [neoliberal] system makes it possible, and perhaps acceptable, to kill them with impunity” (Livingston, 2004, 60). Additionally, Mercedes Olivera describes how the structural causes of violence against women in Mexico demonstrates the failure of the neoliberal model to provide either development or the ideal of democracy, and she states that femicide is “a direct expression of the structural violence of the neoliberal social system” (Olivera, 2006, 106). She argues that shifting to a neoliberal system requires a violent set of social transformations where mandates are put into place through patriarchal power which undercut and damage society’s and individual’s rights, interests, and needs. According to Olivera, this system perpetuates violence of all kinds and it “creates a social ecology in which men are driven to hypermasculinity, exaggerating the violent, authoritarian, aggressive aspects of male identity in an attempt to preserve that identity” (Olivera, 2006, 106). She further argues this will cause conflicts in relationships which may increase in severity as men experience growing pressure produced by unemployment, poverty, social polarization, alcoholism, and insecurity, all of which are accelerated by neoliberal policies and are important structural causes of increasing rates of VAWG (Olivera, 2006).

For women in Costa Rica, these are all serious concerns as well. During the 1980s when neoliberal policies were implemented, the increasing poverty had severe impacts on women especially. By 1991, 3 of every 10 families in Costa Rica lived in poverty with the majority of poor families headed by women (Isla, 2003). Although there has been an increasing number of jobs due to growth in the production of goods for export and in the

expansion of its tourism and service sectors, women in Costa Rica still experience many of the problems previously discussed. When looking at sex-disaggregated data for Costa Rica, you find women measured lower than men in many areas, including in their financial inclusion, access to a formal job, and perception of government responsiveness. Women in the country earn 70 cents for every dollar a man earns, they face higher unemployment, and they lack job opportunities, especially in rural areas. Women in Costa Rica are often relegated to low-skill and low-paying jobs that lack health insurance, and they also face prejudice due to maternity leave and child care issues (Arias, 2016d).

Women in Costa Rica are also no exception to violence, despite the identity of the country as a peaceful place and the legal action taken by the government to protect them. Many women experience domestic violence, discrimination, and harassment, and femicide is a serious concern in the country (Anders, 2017b). Although it is difficult to get accurate incidence rates, there have been several reports saying that the numbers may be increasing. One article noted that the number of domestic violence victims treated at public hospitals has increased by one-third over the three year period from 2013 to 2015, from 9,823 cases in 2013 to 13,036 in 2015 (Arias, 2016a). Another report notes that despite passage of Costa Rica's law criminalizing domestic violence in 2008, rates of domestic violence against women were rising, with very few convictions. The article states that Costa Rican police arrest an average of one person per hour for domestic violence, and more than 20,000 domestic violence complaints are phoned into agencies each year. Also, according to data from the judiciary's Gender Violence Observatory, the number of complaints of sexual harassment in public increased 70 percent from 2014 to 2015 (from 1,562 to 2,638 cases) and the most egregious form of violence against

women, femicide, was reported to be occurring on average at a rate of more than one woman killed per week in 2016 (Anders, 2017a).

Despite Costa Rica's progressive national laws, these crimes often go unpunished. Reports showed that of those calls made to agencies by victims of domestic violence, very few were followed up with a formal complaint (less than 5%). Also, another report showed that more than 76 percent of the formal domestic violence cases end up being rejected by the courts, and a report from the UN Human Rights Committee notes that out of over 1,000 reported cases of rape in 2015, only about 300 had been tried (UN Office of the High Commissioner, 2016). This lack of enforcement of laws has assisted in creating a system where violence occurs with impunity and may likely deter women from reporting the violence they do experience, effectively working to further hide something that is already difficult to bring into the open. Additionally, this may also work to skew the picture of violence, making it seem as if the rate of violence is actually lower.

Costa Rica has done many things in the spirit of addressing violence against women, including, signing onto regional and global treaties, passing numerous national laws aimed at eliminating violence and increasing equality for women, and creating action plans and governmental agencies tasked with helping women who experience violence. Yet, despite this, violence against women is still a serious issue in Costa Rica. My aim with this project is to explore this issue further by talking to women in the country. Through these conversations, I learn what women identify as the salient issues they face and how these show up in their lives. I also explore how to better connect macro-level solutions and social change with improving women's lives. It is my hope that by providing more details and analyses, as well as bringing in the voices of women in the

country, we may move beyond the “single story” of Costa Rica toward a more nuanced understanding of the multilayered lives of Costa Rican women and the struggles and victories they experience.

Additionally, I explore ways in which real change may be made in addressing gender inequality, examining how many women are seeking out and creating opportunities for themselves and their families through local cooperative associations. It is through these institutions that many women have been able to earn an income, learn new skills, and expand their options while working within the constraints of existing gender ideologies and neoliberal policies in Costa Rica. At the same time, they are also pushing the boundaries of these ideologies and creating small changes in themselves, their families, and even in their communities, which may have the potential to accumulate into changes in the larger society as a whole.

In the next chapter (3) I turn to my analysis of the data gathered from my interviews and questionnaires with women, examining the themes that arose from this data. Then in Chapter 4, I take an in-depth look at cooperative associations and the data I collected from my research at these Costa Rican institutions.

CHAPTER III

CENTERING WOMEN'S VOICES

Introduction – The Law and Women in Costa Rica

Costa Rica has a long history of passing progressive legislation aimed at protecting and improving the lives of women. Women received the right to vote in 1949 with the drafting of the country's new constitution. In 1967, nearly 20 years *before* the landmark international *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)* Costa Rica passed its own *Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*. In 1974 Costa Rica became one of the first countries in the world to pass legislation granting parental authority to both spouses, providing parenting equity in cases of divorce, and, in 1990 the Act for Promoting the Social Equality of Women made equal access to quality education a guarantee for women as well as men..

Starting in 2007, the country also enhanced its political equality measures as well, enacting several progressive quota systems aimed at increasing the number of women in political office. The country requires that a minimum of 50% of candidates for office must be women and that women's names be placed alternately with men's on the ballot for each party (Liepold, 2012). These measures have helped increase the number of women in parliament from 15 percent in 1994 to 38.5 percent in 2006 (Sagot, 2010), and in 2010, Costa Rica even elected its first female president, Laura Chinchilla.

Additionally, the country has taken numerous steps to specifically address discrimination and violence against women, and to provide institutional support for those who do experience it. The international *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of*

Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was ratified in 1986, along with its *Optional Protocol* in 2001. These were significant in defining what constitutes discrimination and they set agendas for state action to end it. By signing onto CEDAW, Costa Rica legally committed itself to taking steps to eliminate discrimination in their legal systems, establishing institutions to ensure effective protection of women from discrimination, and they agreed to “take all appropriate measures, including legislation and temporary special measures, so that women can enjoy all their human rights and fundamental freedoms” (UN General Assembly, 1979).

In 1994, Costa Rica signed onto the *Convention of Belém do Para*, the world’s first binding international treaty recognizing violence against women as a violation of human rights (Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and Caribbean, n.d.). In 1996 the government also passed the extensive *Domestic Violence Law*, which allowed for protective measures to be enforced even without criminal or civil proceedings, and it permitted the removal of perpetrators from the home, barred them from access to the victim and family and from owning firearms, but still required that they provide financial support for their family. Additionally, this Domestic Violence Law created the *National Plan to Treat and Prevent Intra-Family Violence* (1996) which established an integrated system of services to prevent domestic violence, including the formation of an extended network of shelters and emergency hotlines staffed with specially trained people (Creel, 2001).

Like many other Latin American countries that have since followed, Costa Rica was one of the first to pass a law⁵ that made specific reference to femicide, criminalizing

⁵ La Ley N° 8589 del 25 de abril de 2007 (*The Act on the Criminalization of Violence against Women* adopted on April 25, 2007).

this gendered murder of women, and calling for 20 to 35 year prison sentences for a man who murders his partner,⁶ which is almost twice the previous penalty (Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa, 2008). The country has followed that law with several other measures, including the establishment of a High Level Commission to monitor compliance with the Violence Against Women Act, the creation of an internal register of perpetrators, increasing access to justice for victims, and passage of the following legislation: the 2009 legislation *Creation of the National System for the Care and Prevention of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*, the 2010 *Law against Harassment or Sexual Harassment in Employment and Teaching*, the 2012 *Law against Trafficking in Persons*, and the 2013 *Emergency Plan to Reduce Gender Related Murders of Women*, which works to protect women at risk of being murdered by a partner or ex-partner by providing legal and psychological assistance, providing a domestic violence legal advisory service, and strengthening the special assistance and shelter centers for women and their children (UN Women, 2016b).

Throughout this time, multiple measures have pointed to a positive picture of the status of Costa Rican women. The country has rated consistently high in many global gender measures, including in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2017), which measures the magnitude of gender disparities in the four areas of economic participation, educational attainment, political empowerment, and health and survival. In this report, Costa Rica ranked 8th in Latin America, and 41st out of 144 countries globally, and the country had an overall gender parity score of .727 (where scores range from 0.00, representing no parity, to 1.00, representing an egalitarian relationship between genders)

⁶ "Partner" is defined in the law as their spouse or partner in a conjugal union, provided that they have had one or more children and have lived as a married couple for at least the last two years (UN Women, 2016a).

(World Economic Forum, 2017). Additionally, the government considers sexual and reproductive health a fundamental right and women have access to contraception guaranteed under the General Health Act. Women's enrollment rates in school have risen as well as the number of women joining the workforce, and Costa Rican law mandates that women be paid equal to men for the same work.

However, despite the long list of legal measures and positive statistical measures described in the preceding paragraphs, there are many other reports that show Costa Rican women experience a variety of issues including poverty, gender inequality, discrimination, harassment and violence. Despite the country's unique reputation as an anomaly in the region and the many legal efforts implemented to create a safe and prosperous country for all citizens, women often do not feel the effects of these measures in their everyday lives. While the issues women in Costa Rica face are sadly not uncommon, I believe it is valuable and important to hear directly from Costa Rican women in order to learn how they experience these issues in their specific spaces and lives. While I spoke with a variety of women at different locations throughout Costa Rica, I heard many themes that were similar across women's experiences. Common themes emerged that pointed to a system of patriarchy and male dominance that exists in Costa Rica despite the country's egalitarian reputation and many progressive gender policies.

In this chapter I present these common themes and examine their significance in understanding the lived realities of women, while also gendering the narrative of Costa Rica. I also present ideas that women shared with me for dealing with the issues they

In examining the data, several themes began to emerge. These themes, as identified by the 17 women who participated in the study, included:

- *violence, discrimination, and harassment*, (identified 20 times by 11 women);
- *machismo, gender stereotypes, male domination, and inequality* (identified 11 times by 7 women);
- *lack of opportunities for education and employment* (identified 10 times by 8 women);
- *single motherhood/teenage pregnancies* (identified 8 times by 6 women);
- *fair pay for work* (identified 3 times by 3 women);
- *lack of free time* (identified 3 times by 3 women);
- *a sense of dependency on men* (identified 2 times by 2 women);
- *lack of laws or knowledge about the laws for women* (identified 2 times by 2 women).

Figure 15 below shows the prevalence of themes shared by participants in response to questionnaire and interview question 1: *What do you think are the top issues you or the women in Costa Rica face?*

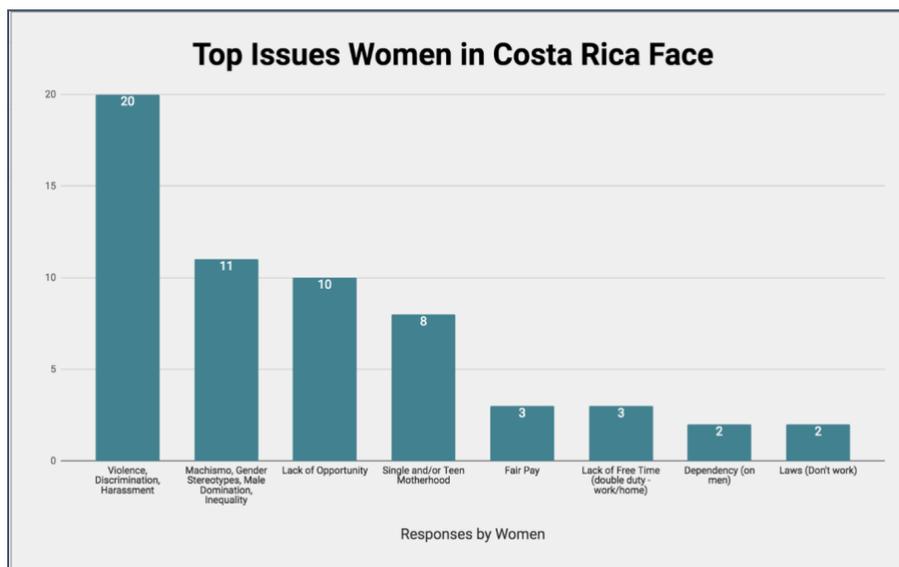


Figure 15: Prevalence of themes shared by participants in response to questionnaire and interview question 1: *What do you think are the top issues you or the women in Costa Rica face?*

Although I have organized the data into three broad categories⁷ that encompass the individual themes that emerged, these themes were actually woven together by women in interconnected ways. What can be seen through their stories is the interrelated dynamics of culture, gender, and economics at play in Costa Rica. For many of the women, they saw their own opportunities – to study, to earn, to have a future with independence – as being constrained by gender ideologies and gender relations. These limited opportunities shaped an uncertainty or precarity that they expressed as dependency on men. They also reported facing machismo and gender discrimination in the workplace and in public spaces generally. While the women I spoke with identified cultural gender dynamics, including machismo and misogyny, as significant causes of the problems and as obstacles to change, they also spoke hopefully of their daughter’s futures and offered insightful solutions for change in their country. In the following sections I present these conversations, highlighting the knowledge and insights we can gain by talking to women about their everyday lived experiences.

Violence, Discrimination, and Harassment

Violence against women is defined as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (United Nations General Assembly, 1993).

Violence against women is pervasive worldwide, with a first of its kind study by the World Health Organization (WHO) finding that an estimated 1 in 3 (35%) of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime, most often at the

⁷ These broad categories are: 1) Violence, Discrimination, and Harassment, 2) Machismo, Gender Ideologies, Male Dominance, and Inequality, 3) Limited Opportunities, Lack of Free Time, and Dependency on Men

hands of an intimate partner (World Health Organization, et. al., 2013). This violence occurs across countries, cultures, and races, and is an expression of a long history of unequal power relations between women and men rooted in a persistent domination over and discrimination against women by men (UN Women, 2011; United Nations General Assembly, 1993). Violence against women takes on a myriad of forms, including physical and sexual violence, discrimination, and harassment. In the following subsections, I examine these three forms of violence which were discussed by 13 of the 17 women participating in questionnaires and/or interviews.

Violence

Though the WHO report mentioned above found an astonishingly high rate of violence against women (1 in 3), they also note that the reported numbers are likely underestimated due to underreporting by women who experience violence. This lack of reporting is due to many factors, including fear of retaliation, economic dependency, as well as embarrassment and stigma around violence. Additionally, the prevailing societal attitudes that view women as unequal and subordinate to men are used to rationalize, tolerate, or excuse this violence (Gracia, 2004; World Health Organization & Pan American Health Organization, 2014). Violence experienced by women is often still considered a private matter, not a topic to be publicly discussed. This is the case in most places, including Costa Rica, as one of my interviewees, Alicia discussed with me:

“If things like that happen [violence] they are very intimate with the family, they are not the kind of things that women just talk about because no one likes to hear about those things. You hear about them on nationalized stories and social media though.”

Doña Nery is a woman in her 60s from the tourist town of Monteverde. She is the current Director of the cooperative association CASEM and was one of its original founding members in 1982. As her quote above shows, Alicia points to the attitude and belief that other people's needs, and comfort take priority. That "no one likes to hear about those things," illustrates the notion that violence is still thought of as something that women should keep quiet about because she shouldn't bother others with something they do not like to hear about. This can lead to feelings of shame and can make it very difficult for women to speak up and get the help and support they need.

Additionally, many women do not report violence because they do not know of the laws available to protect them. While Costa Rica has passed many national laws and signed onto important regional and international treaties to address violence, I heard from several women who felt that these laws were not known or not adequate. Maria, a grandmother from a rural town in northern Costa Rica told me, "The law in Costa Rica does not help the women much," and Elizabeth, a woman in her early 50s from Ciudad Colón said, "I think though we have laws to protect women I think they are not made public for us, so we are not aware how to fight back when we have been done an injustice." This lack of knowledge about laws is particularly relevant for women like Maria and many others whom I spoke with from rural areas where rates of violence are highest, while resources, organizations, and support are lacking the most in these areas (Anders, 2017b; Arias, 2016a; Lopez, 2014).

Even when women did have knowledge about the laws, they spoke of them not being sufficient or not working. Alicia described a situation where women were still being discriminated against in hiring practices despite laws making this illegal. She

stated, “Even though in this country there’s a lot of laws that protect women, sometimes that can be beneficial but that can also be a problem. [For example] when it comes to pregnancies – the employers will be more afraid to hire [women] because there will be so many more legal consequences if they don’t follow through.” She also explained that older women are frequently discriminated against as they are passed over for jobs because of their age, even if they are more qualified.

Yesenia, a teacher I met in the San Jose suburb of Ciudad Colón, told me, “there are many issues with violence against women in this country,” and she said she had seen many disturbing situations with young women from her role as a teacher. She spoke of a particular instance where the laws were not working to protect adolescent girls from violence, describing a situation where a 65-year-old married man was having a sexual relationship with a 13-year-old girl and a 16-year-old girl. Yesenia said the man did not think this was a problem and that despite there being laws against this, no one was doing anything to stop it. Costa Rica did recently pass legislation, the “Bill to Ban Improper Relationships,” in October of 2016, which declares that sex between an adult and a minor under 18 is illegal, and defines sex between an adult and a person under 13 as rape (Arias, 2016c). Hopefully this law will be effective in reducing incidents like the one of which Yesenia spoke. However, as several women I interviewed stated and as the continuing problem of violence against women in Costa Rica suggests, it is unlikely this law alone will be enough.

In addition to women not knowing about laws or the laws not being sufficient or working, women are also reluctant to talk about violence or report violence because they do not believe the legal system will actually protect them, despite laws being in place.

This stems from the fact that the number of cases actually resulting in convictions by perpetrators is very low. According to the Observatory on Gender Violence Against Women, the dismissal rate for cases brought to the courts was 88.74% in 2016. This would make it difficult for any woman to want to bring charges against a man knowing he will likely not be punished for it. Yesenia spoke of this when she described the two young girls in the relationship with the much older man. She said that even if someone had come forward, the law probably would not protect the girls anyway because “usually men just get out of trouble because they are men.” There are, however, efforts under way to address this with the Public Ministry, criminal courts, domestic violence courts, and other offices of the Judiciary to improve the application of the Violence Against Women Law so more women feel protected by the justice system (Observatory on Gender Violence against Women and Access to Justice, 2016a).

Discrimination

Women in Costa Rica face discrimination in a variety of situations despite laws such as the Labour Procedure Reform law of January 2016 which prohibits gender-based discrimination and requires that the government promote political, economic, social, and cultural equality (Anders, 2017b; United States Department of State, 2012). Many of the women with whom I spoke shared stories of this discrimination with me. Sofia, a 22-year-old young woman from San Miguel, completed a year-long English course which helped her get a management position at the cooperative I visited. She coordinates tours of the cooperative for visiting tourists and also oversees several male coworkers. She explained what it was like being in a position of power and the struggles she faced in this role during the first six months she worked there.

“When I first started working here there were two guys who had been here for years. It was really difficult because I was the boss, but when I got here they didn’t pay attention to me, they didn’t talk to me, they didn’t care about me.”

Sofia described the surprise she felt when she experienced this treatment by her male co-workers. To her, the best way to explain their behavior was machismo,⁸ when for nearly six months these men did not accept her as their boss and routinely ignored or usurped her authority at work. She said, “When it was time to say what the guys needed to do, they would just leave me out.” Sofia also said that if someone called on the phone or came to the cooperative, her male co-workers would not tell them that she was the boss. “They would just say, ‘okay I will give them the information’ but they didn’t mention me or that I am the boss,” she told me. She believed this was because she is a woman and the men did not like having a female in an authority position over them. Sofia also pointed out her surprise that these attitudes toward women still existed in the younger men she supervised. She told me,

“I didn’t think it could happen to me and when I got here it was very difficult, because how can it happen if they are young? It could happen many years ago, but not now...maybe with some guy who is like 50 but not with some guy who is like 18. They are young...I thought that the culture is changing. I learned that we are women and we still have to work hard against that.”

Sofia points to the persistence of machismo and gender inequality across generations despite efforts made by women’s rights groups and legislative measures to change this. Doña Nery also echoed this, saying how hard it is to change these things: “There is still

⁸ I explain machismo in detail in the next section.

that mindset of men being smarter than women ... even though it has improved a lot, you can still feel it.”

Yesenia, the teacher from Ciudad Colón, also described situations she had experienced at work where she was treated unfairly and felt discriminated against because she was a woman. She told me about one instance in particular that had bothered her greatly.

“I think my previous principal actually hated women. One time I was sitting with 2 male students after an activity they had done, and the principal looked right at me and pointed at me and very rudely said ‘you, go get a broom and sweep up this mess.’ I felt humiliated and very offended that he showed no respect and that he would make me do that instead of the students who were sitting there. It was because the students were males and the principal thought it was women’s work to clean up.”

Yesenia also talked about the way she and her fellow co-workers felt frustrated and annoyed by the lack of women in higher-level positions at the school where they had worked.

“At the school where I used to work there were only male principals and administrators. There were also only men as the heads of each department. Me and the women used to talk about that a lot and ask each other why it was only men in the leadership positions.”

She was frustrated by this because without women in higher-level administration positions she felt her concerns were not understood or heard. This also meant she was forced to deal with men, like her principal, who had treated her disrespectfully and who

Yesenia felt even hated women. As Yesenia's and Sofia's stories demonstrate, even when women do achieve education, male dominance and gender ideologies shape and limit women's opportunities and perceptions of work.

In addition to feeling discriminated against and humiliated at work, many women also face discrimination when looking for employment. Several of those I spoke with told me that women are not selected during the hiring process because they are viewed as less knowledgeable than a man, or they are too old, or if they are young employers do not want to be responsible for paying the woman if she gets pregnant. One young 19-year-old woman I met who had just graduated from high school said she is looking for a job before going to college and is finding this process very difficult. She described this as a "large problem of discrimination" in women getting jobs in her area, saying,

"It happens that in some jobs by the type of labor, they prefer men although in some cases a woman has more knowledge than a man. People must understand that today everyone has the same rights and duties both men and women."

Doña Nery noted this as well when telling me about barriers women face in hiring practices, "even if [women] have the same amount of education [employers] would choose the man over the woman." She also talked about the age discrimination older women face in getting jobs, saying, "while you are young it is easier to find a job because there are many ... but when you are older, over 50, it gets really hard." She said this is because employers do not want to hire older women. She also noted that younger women face discrimination in hiring practices as well, saying,

"The problem with finding a job while you are young is that many employers worry about the woman getting pregnant because then they would have to pay for

time while they are pregnant, so it is a loss for the company. That affects a lot of girls.”

This was echoed by Anna, a middle-age woman who runs a small business from her home in Curridabat, a busy suburb of the capital San Jose. She told me, “Maternity is a threat to many companies that want to employ women. Although they may be better professionals than men, they are people who can generate disabilities that [the companies] do not want to cover.” Both women told me they know of this happening despite there being laws in Costa Rica to protect women from this type of discrimination.

In summary, women in Costa Rica experienced gender and age discrimination, being overlooked for jobs because they were too old, or they were too young and may get pregnant, or because they were viewed as not being as capable as a man of doing the same job. They were also not hired for positions despite being more qualified than a man, and if they were able to advance into positions of power, they often had their authority usurped by men they supervise. Even as Costa Rica has progressive laws meant to combat this discrimination, women’s reports suggest these practices are still pervasive. Furthermore, they do not find the laws, or the judicial system more generally, supportive of their claims nor even as viable places to bring their claims.

Harassment

In addition to discrimination, sexual harassment is also a form of violence that is extremely pervasive worldwide and affects women and girls at work, in educational institutions, and in public spaces. This is a common experience for women in Costa Rica, with a 2015 survey conducted by the University of Costa Rica finding that 61.7% of women and 32.8% of men had been victims of sexual harassment on the streets of the

country (González, 2016), and another report by the University of Costa Rica in 2016 found that 6 out of 10 women said they had been victims of sexual harassment (Arias, 2016b). Women's groups in Costa Rica such as the Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (the National Women's Institute) and the Colectivo Acción Respeto de Costa Rica (Respect Action – Costa Rica) have begun a public campaign to bring awareness to the issue of harassment with billboards, signs on busses, and television ads informing women where they should file a complaint if they've experienced harassment. Under Costa Rica's Criminal Code, none of the behaviors that are considered street harassment are considered crimes and these groups are pushing for tougher and more inclusive laws that would criminalize this type of sexual harassment (Arias, 2016b).

The way women experience this in their daily lives was talked about by Elizabeth who stated, "Sexual harassment is a huge problem with no help from anywhere." She described her personal situations in dealing with harassment, saying, "When I walk in any public place here I must walk as if I know my place, that is not be too friendly or even looking straight in another face." Like Elizabeth, I also experienced some of this while in Costa Rica. In one city in particular, while my 15-year-old daughter and I were walking around the town center, we noticed that many men stared at us and watched us in a way that made us feel very uncomfortable, so much so that we ended up eating our lunch each day in our room rather than out in the city park where we had planned. We also experienced another incidence while riding on a city bus. A man came and sat down behind us, striking up a conversation because he had lived in the United States for a short time and knew some English. He kept talking to us throughout the ride despite our lack of response, and even reached into our seat to touch the braids in my daughter's hair

multiple times in a way that made us both feel very uncomfortable and a bit threatened. He asked where we were staying several times and I gave him incorrect information because I felt scared. We were both relieved when he got off the bus at the stop before ours, as we had a long walk in the dark by ourselves to get to the house where we were staying.

Both my experiences and Elizabeth's description of having to "know her place" when out in public bring up important points that are not always focused on as much in the discussion of violence against women. Yet these seemingly "small" or "less serious" offenses are exceptionally common forms of sexual violence that play a role in almost every woman's everyday experiences and often dictate how they move about the world. An article by Vera-Gray (2016) discusses these less talked about "routine intrusions" that women commonly experience and describes how the women in her study "navigate interruptions, intrusions, and harassment from unknown men in public." She noted that a surprising result of her interviews with women was just how much work they put into avoiding these intrusions and the impact this has on them. She found that women had to spend extra time thinking about what route they should walk, how they should carry themselves and what facial expressions they should make, where they should sit on a bus, and what they should wear to avoid attention including the use of "shields" such as headphones, scarves, hats, and sunglasses as a way to avoid these intrusions. Vera-Gray calls this "safety work" and described how this disrupts women's lives, leaving them burdened and "less free to think about the things they want to think about because of the extra effort they have to put in to feel safe" (Vera-Gray, 2016, 1).

A recurring theme for many of the women in Vera-Gray's study was a sense of male entitlement which made men feel it was okay to intrude into women's spaces. Many of the women I talked with in Costa Rica had similar thoughts, such as Elizabeth who stated, "The solution would be to change a culture of machismo or male dominance to women being seen not as sexual objects but as equals" and Alicia who said, "there is still the mindset the men are smarter than women." Additionally, for many of the women, they identified interrelated dynamics of culture, gender, and economics as being the driving forces for many of the issues they described. Responses to my question, *What do you think are some of the causes or reasons for the issues you identified that women face*, prompted many women to discuss cultural factors and what they termed as machismo. In the next section I turn to a discussion of the themes of machismo, gender stereotypes, male dominance, and inequality that women identified, and how this has affected their lives.

Machismo, Gender Ideologies, Male Dominance, Inequality

During my interviews, women described issues such as gender ideologies, male dominance, and inequality as being serious problems they face in their everyday lives. Additionally, the term "machismo" was brought up by many women to identify cultural gender dynamics that both reflected and constituted the other issues they described.

According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, machismo is defined as "a strong sense of masculine pride" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.), though as Coronado (2015) discusses, the term is much more complex and multifaceted than what he feels it has been reduced to, simply a "male bravado that flirts with physical harm to be sexual" (Coronado, 2015). Alfredo Mirandé (1997) conducted in-depth interviews with Latino

men and from these he defined machismo as a multidimensional ideology of two models: “The first model stresses external attributes such as strength, sexual prowess, and power; the second stresses internal qualities like honor, responsibilities, respect, and courage” (Alfredo, 1997, 77). Perhaps machismo then, may best be perceived as a pervasive cultural experience, with a continuum of intensity. For many of the women I spoke with in Costa Rica, this “machismo culture” as they called it, meant a culture of male domination which reflected gender ideologies, and shaped gender relations and constrained their choices. They also talked about machismo culture contributing to inequality in relationships, in the workplace, in institutions, and in public spaces generally. They identify these cultural gender dynamics, including machismo and misogyny, as significant causes of the problems they face and as obstacles to change.

Elizabeth described ideas of gender as rooted in this culture of machismo and male dominance. She said, “I have lived in Costa Rica for 28 years and raised my 2 born children here. I'm originally from the United States. Now what I have observed over the years living here in Costa Rica is what women in the world probably would say is male domination.” This is both a cultural and a structural issue, as Elizabeth says, “Being a foreigner trying to raise a boy and a girl in this country I could not help but see the difference made to my two beautiful equally raised children. Though we sent them to private school, mathematics was not encouraged for my daughter. Why, I do not know to this day.” Elizabeth also explained how many women have internalized these gender ideologies and values, saying, “The love mothers give here in Costa Rica is still to this day one sided. The little boys receiving so much more attention. You could call it machismo from the cradle.” As Elizabeth points to, male dominance does not just reside

in men, it is a cultural phenomenon with women playing a role in its perpetuation. Cultural ideas create and shape gender ideologies, which influence behaviors, the choices women have available and the choices that they make, as well as affecting the ways they move through the world. As is explained by symbolic interaction theory, the process of gendering begins at birth when we, as people and institutions in a society, assign certain meanings and expectations to others based on the way bodies are identified as either boy or girl in a gender binary system. The socially constructed meanings of gender work at various levels to inform girls and boys of how they are expected to behave, dress, and speak, what roles they should take on, and what spaces they should occupy. In a patriarchal society or a machismo culture, men are taught to be competitive, aggressive and assertive (York, 2011). This has often led to an environment where men are in dominant positions within their family, and by extension, in political, economic, and other social institutions as well (French, 1985; Lerner, 1986; Yodanis, 2004). Ideas about gender in a patriarchal society/machismo culture have effects on both men and women and can be perpetuated by both through socially constructed meanings of gender that shape people's life chances, as Elizabeth describes.

Anna also talked about cultural gender dynamics, saying, "Most of the causes [of women's issues] are cultural, because of the machismo that still exists in our country, not because of the capacity we [women] can have. It looks like a threat [to men]." I met Anna, a woman in her 40s who lived in the suburb of Curridabat, when I stayed in her home on my way back to San Jose. In my conversations with her she explained that she has been personally affected by gender inequality, saying that her ability to have a job with an equal salary to a man's is limited, as is her purchasing power different from that

of a man's. She is a small business owner and it is hard for her to get financing for her business.

Anna did say, however, that there have been some recent changes which are providing better options for women. She told me, "there are now supports at the national level that can help and solve different needs at the level of women, with projects, financing or simply support and help for us." She shared that there were newly created special banks for women – to help address some of the barriers women have faced to managing their own finances and to help them get loans for small businesses. Anna acknowledged that there is still a long way to go but said hopefully, "When men are told, and I think they know it, but they do not want to accept it, that we can be equal or better than them, we can solve many of the problems that are seen worldwide by the difference of sexes."

Many other women talked about the problems of machismo as well. Yesenia told me that she believes many of the issues she described, including violence against women, stems from a culture of machismo and misogyny that is deeply ingrained and hard to change. Mariana shared that she sees machismo and domestic violence as problems and said that she and her husband have very different points of view about this issue (he disagrees with her that it is even a problem). Gabriela noted that machismo is a cause for some of the issues she faces, such as discrimination in the workplace and Doña Nery identified a contributor to the issues women face as being one where men feel like they must remain superior to women in the workplace and family life, telling me that "the culture of how men feel like they cannot let a woman go over them" is a large contributor to many of the problems women face.

Additionally, many of the women I spoke with in Costa Rica saw this machismo culture as a contributing factor in shaping their roles and their choices. For many women, they saw their own opportunities – to study, to earn, to have a future with independence – as constrained by these gender ideologies and gender relations. These limited opportunities then shaped an uncertainty or precarity that they expressed as dependency on men. I next turn to a discussion of these interrelated dynamics of limited opportunities, a heavy workload with little free time, and the dependency on men of which women spoke.

Limited Opportunities, Lack of Free Time, Dependency on Men

Many women discussed economic problems they have due to a lack of opportunities. They described this lack of opportunity in the sense of not being able to complete school or not being able to get a higher education or receive additional training to increase their skills because they are women. They saw this lack of education and training as constraining the job options they had, which then affected their economic situations. They felt that because they were women, they had less opportunities and options. They also told me that because they were women, they lacked free time to gain additional skills or to have time for themselves because they were expected to do all of the care work at home in addition to working outside the home. Where women did not work outside the home, they talked about feeling a sense of dependency on men for financial support and this left them feeling vulnerable. In light of Costa Rica's story of exceptionalism, it would seem that women would have more opportunities to get an education and pursue careers, however, as my interviewees demonstrated, women are still constrained in their choices and options. Where the turn to neoliberalism in the country was supposed to

increase these opportunities and choices, most women were left feeling they had few choices, they were overworked, and even when they earned their own money they were still dependent on their husbands. In the next subsections, I discuss each of these themes individually although they are all interrelated and can often leave women feeling frustrated and vulnerable.

Limited Opportunities

Several women spoke about not having the opportunity to go to school because they are women. Doña Nery told me she had gone to school as a child for just a short while, only until she was able to read and write, because that's what her dad considered most important. She said, "Then he told me 'that's it, that's all you really need to know' because I would only be taking care of kids. But all my brothers did go to college and got degrees but because I was a woman, I wasn't allowed to do that." Alicia related this lack of schooling to limited employment choices later in life when she talked about the difficulty of finding work as an older woman.

Mariana also talked about her limited opportunities to go to school and the consequences this has had on her choices. She is a middle-aged, married mother of two who lives in San Miguel and is a cook in the restaurant of a cooperative I visited. She described not having the opportunity to go to school because, like Alicia, her parents believed her future was as a wife and mother whose primary responsibilities would be as a caregiver of her family and caretaker of their home. She described being told, "If you study, when you are married you will just be cleaning shit, so why study, you will just take care of your husband, and kids, and house. You don't need to study." Mariana feels this is a problem in her life because it has limited her employment options and she wishes

she had more opportunities available to learn and to earn more money. She also told me that she would like to learn more about technology, such as being trained to use the computer or the credit card machine at work, which would offer her additional skills and maybe the possibility of getting a better paying job. However, she says she never has enough time to learn new skills because, as she said, “I always have work I must do for everyone else.”

Other women told me about ways in which they, or women they knew, were affected by lack of opportunities of different kinds. Natalia, a mother of one grown daughter and the owner of a small business renting rooms to tourists in San Jose, told me that women face many problems including a lack of academic preparation, a lack of available jobs, and not getting paid fairly for the work they do. She also described a problem of pregnancy in young women who become single parents and are unable to complete school and get good paying jobs. She told me that they do not have much help with childcare, and they face many economic problems.

Additionally, as Natalia sees it, there is a link between this lack of access to economic and educational opportunities and violence, and she told me, “Some of the problems [women face] are pregnancies in adolescence, therefore some do not finish secondary school, therefore having the need to work but do not have decent wages. These bad economic situations produce stress and often the next step is domestic violence.” Natalia’s suggestion that economically stressful situations lead to violence against women is well documented in the literature. Many studies have examined the relationship between economic situations and domestic violence have found that women with lower socio-economic standings suffer higher rates of domestic violence and are at an increased

risk of VAW (Benson & Fox, 2004; True, 2010; American Psychological Association, 2015).

Women not only struggle with limited educational opportunities leading to reduced job opportunities which can then cause financial problems and increased risks of violence, but when they do work they often face additional obstacles. One such constraint to employment choices that Sofia talked about was the lack of childcare options available to families. Sofia described the catch 22 situation that many women face, saying that while they need jobs to help support their families, it is very hard for them to find affordable childcare so that they are able to work. She thinks there needs to be more childcare options and better paying jobs for women, so they can afford to work and pay for daycare. Mia, a 38-year-old mother of 3 who lives in a small, rural village outside of San Isidro de General echoed Sofia's thoughts related to childcare, saying,

“To work outside the home is very difficult for the family and the children. I am able to have my kids with me because I work at a store right next to my house. But many women have to work far from home and from their children, so other people have to watch their kids and it is often a bad situation for the children - they can be treated poorly. Also, when you have to pay someone else to watch your children while you work you end up with not very much money left because you don't get paid much to begin with and then you have to pay someone else to take care of your children.”

This situation is very difficult for many women who must work outside the home in order to earn an income and help support their families financially. In order to do this, they must often make difficult decisions as to who will watch their children and how much it

will cost for good quality childcare. Because neoliberalism has contributed to women being often relegated to low paying positions, it is difficult to balance how little they get paid and how much they must pay for childcare. The cutting of social safety nets, or the foreclosure of possibilities for state or public support, is a defining feature of neoliberal policies. This can disproportionately affect women, who are the ones responsible for household duties and ensuring for the care of children. This creates added stress to their busy lives and often forces women to make tough choices within limited possibilities.

Gabriela, who was successfully positioned in a management-level position at a cooperative I visited also discussed the limited and tough choices that many women are forced to make in order to support their families, saying, "...we have a very big economic problem, the cost of living is very expensive, there is a 4% unemployment and this affects many women to find other ways to make a living [such as] in prostitution, to support their children."

Mia extends Gabriela's point that all Costa Ricans suffer, saying that men too suffer, which then in turn causes problems for women and for children.

"Many men are not working and many are incarcerated. They don't always have steady work. They don't have a lot of money and this leads to many social problems. Like men are incarcerated or there is divorce and then they have to pay the mom for their children, but they don't always have the money to do that. This also can lead to many problems in the home. It can be a bad situation for the children at home."

Situations such as this, described by Mia, can increase pressure on men who are unable to economically support their families, and this can also add increasing pressure to women's lives, as they must take on a larger role in providing for their children.

Lack of Free Time

Several women talked about this need to work outside the home to help support their family, yet they are also responsible for all the work inside the home as well, leaving them very little free time for themselves. Mariana told me "I sometimes wish I had more time for myself, always time is a problem. Sometimes I want to do my hair or nails, but I always say, 'I'll have to do it tomorrow' because I always have to do other chores for other people. I always have some kind of work I have to do." When I asked Mariana if her husband helped her at home, she said, "When he is happy he helps, but when he is bored or angry he is just on his cell phone all the time and doesn't help." Effectively, it is the responsibility of Mariana to get all of the household work and childcare work done and her husband helps if and when he feels like it.

Anna also spoke about free time being an issue for her and other women she knows, saying a problem she faces is ... "The time it takes to have a job outside the home and the responsibilities of the home. We are still in a fairly sexist culture where women still have most of the household responsibilities and we must work double to achieve less together with the work of the house that is mostly unpaid." She explained that the problem is not the capacity of women, but it is oftentimes all the roles women must play:

"In fact, it is a question of organizing the time to perform all the tasks that a woman must perform: wife, mother, companion, friend, provider, as well as her husband, teacher, counselor, domestic servant, driver, nurse, others. However,

these tasks are overwhelming for the vast majority, which causes us much fatigue and lack of time to dedicate ourselves as women to our small personal space, which in many cases does not exist.”

Many women described this lack of time and their limited opportunities for education and learning new skills as leading to a backward loop: they do not have jobs, or are not seen as able to do certain jobs, or only able to do specific jobs because they didn't study, leading to a dependence on their husbands. This sense of dependency came through in my conversations with both Mariana and **Victoria**.

Dependency on Men

Mariana told me that despite working 10-hour days, 6 days per week, she must still ask her husband for money, which she does not like. She identifies with other women who experience this dependency, saying, “Many women don't have jobs because we didn't study, so we depend on our husbands.” Victoria, a 21-year-old young woman who graduated from high school and then lived in her parents' home until getting married last year, described this dependency as well. She works inside the home, taking care of the household and her husband, but does not earn an income from outside work. She told me, “My husband works, and I do not. When I need money, I have to ask,” which is something she does not particularly like having to do. This can leave Victoria and other women in similar situations vulnerable to the will of their husbands who control the economic aspects of their lives. This economic control can play a significant role in a woman's feelings of powerlessness, particularly if there are issues of violence in the home. She may not have the resources to seek help and may feel trapped in the situation. Couple this structural dependency with the impunity issues for violence against women in

the country, and it helps provide some clarity as to why women would be reluctant to reach out for help or leave abusive situations.

While many women may have been frustrated and sometimes discouraged by the situation they are in, or those that women in the country are in, they did speak to me in a hopeful tone about their thoughts for the future of their daughters (either those they have now or ones they may have in the future). They described hopes that daughters would be resilient, independent, treated fairly and with respect. These thoughts that they relayed, while in some regards hopeful, also seemed to have a bit of something else too, like these women were resigned to the fact that their situations hadn't changed much despite efforts to improve women's equality. In the next two sections I discuss the conversations of future hopes for daughters as well as some of the solutions women thought may help change the situation for women in their country.

Centering Women's Voices - Future Hopes for Daughters and Suggested Solutions

While talking with Mariana, a woman in her 40s and cook in the restaurant of a cooperative I visited, she told me she wanted her daughter to be happy and wanted the best things for her. She also described her hopes for her daughter's future, making it clear that she wanted something much different for her daughter than what she had, telling me,

“I don't want my daughter to be like me, here cooking and cleaning for everyone else. I want her to study, even if she is just going to get a job at a shoe store, it will still give her more opportunity. I think a person needs an education to get any job nowadays. I don't want my daughter to be like me, I can't be a teacher, or an accountant, or any other good job because I didn't get the opportunity to study. I don't have very many options or choices.”

Victoria, a younger woman I spoke with, described her situation as one where she was dependent on her husband for money and had to ask him when she needed something. When I asked about her hopes for a future daughter if she had one, she also described something quite different from her own experience. She said, “I would like her to study and be a professional, to have her own money and after that is done, a good husband and then children.”

I found this response interesting because Victoria is not an older woman, from an older generation, but is instead a young woman just starting out her adult life with her recent graduation from high school and marriage to a young man. As part of this younger generation, who is supposedly benefitting from the prosperity and increasing equality for women in Costa Rica, she is assumed to have many more opportunities for education and employment. Yet this seems not to be the case here, as Victoria points to wanting something different for her daughter than this dependency that she describes experiencing.

Perhaps this may have something to do with the fact that Victoria is from a small rural area, far from a bigger city where there are less jobs and less money to afford college. In her immediate family of her mother, father and four siblings, no one has left their community to attend college and only her father and brother work outside the home. Neither Victoria nor her mother or sisters had attended college, none of them had a license or learned to drive a car, and none of the women worked outside the home. I did not get a chance to explore this further with Victoria, but in the nine days I stayed with her and her family she seemed to be happy in her situation. She proudly showed me the new home she moved into when she got married, built by her dad and husband on the

same property as her parents. She also seemed excited and happy as she taught me how to make tamales during the annual Christmas event. She explained with pride that as a newly married woman, this would be her first time leading the tradition. It was because of these experiences I had with Victoria that I was very surprised when she described the very different experience she wanted for a future daughter. It almost felt like she had resigned herself to the place she was. She seemed happy and proud of her home and her status as a wife, yet she also told me she did not like being financially dependent on her husband and she described her future daughter's path as the opposite of her own.

Perhaps Victoria's response points to a broader notion of the "patriarchal bargain" coined by Kandiyoti (1988), which she defines as a "set of concrete constraints" within which women must strategize (Kandiyoti, 1988, 274). She explains that "different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct 'rules of the game' and call for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression" (Kandiyoti, 1988, 274). In Costa Rica, women described a situation in which they were limited in their choices, discriminated against and often kept in the place society expected them to be, yet they also described the ways in which they pushed back on these constraints or found ways to work within them. In Victoria's case, it seemed she found happiness and pride in her situation while at the same time yearning for more than what she had and hoping her future daughter would be able to attain what she could not.

Other women I spoke with had hopeful messages for real or imagined daughters, some of which seemed to mirror their own situations and struggles. These included Anna who said,

“I do not have daughters, but if I had, I would teach them that you can achieve anything in this world that you want as long as you put in the effort and dedication. No matter where, when, and how, there will always be stones in the path that will probably make you fall, but the important thing is to know how to get up and move on.”

Sofia also described many things that mirrored what she shared with me about her situation when she spoke of a future daughter overcoming struggles and persevering in a world that is not always easy for women,

“Well I don’t have daughters yet, but if I do, I will teach them about how to struggle and how to believe in herself and that they don’t have to give up anything they want. If they really want to do anything, it doesn’t mean that because you are a girl you shouldn’t get it. And if you do have problems because you are a woman, you don’t have to give up your dreams. You have to struggle and work for things. You feel great when you finally get what you want.”

In addition to their hopes for daughters, many women also shared ideas they have for solutions to the issues women face.

Solutions as Suggested by Women

The solutions women suggested often pointed to changes needed in the underlying patriarchal structures that exist in society. Anna exclaimed passionately that gender equality will be the solution, “When that happens,” she said, “women will have the ability and power to rule the world and probably better than [men].” Anna also points to the many skills women learn through their gendered experiences which lend themselves to possible solutions to the issues they face.

“Not that [men] are doing it wrong, but we organize so many things at the same time and through our lives, we build so many small companies or projects, that it takes a great degree of organization and [multi-tasking] that men do not have.”

In addition to celebrating women’s lived knowledge, Yesenia talked about making women more aware of their rights and changing gender ideologies, saying, “Women need to change their mindsets and believe that they don’t have to live under a man’s oppression. So many women I know say ‘oh my husband is so great because sometimes he helps wash the dishes’. But this is not good - husbands SHOULD be doing this because it should be their jobs too. It shouldn’t just be the woman always waiting on the man.” What Yesenia seems to highlight is a need for both interpersonal changes as well as broader cultural changes that may lead to more gender equality throughout society.

Elizabeth also explained that changing the culture is critical and that it is essential to include women in the processes of finding answers, saying, “The solution would be to change a culture of machismo or male dominance to women being seen not as sexual objects but as equals. And look to them [women] for answers to the problems of this country.”

Several other women also had ideas that pointed to changes in culture, suggesting education as a possible way to do this. This included education for young women and young men too in order to change the culture. Many also pointed to more education for girls in order to create additional options for women and girls to get better jobs. Sofia told me that Costa Rica needs more opportunities for women to learn English, it needs more organizations for women, and more early education to help change the culture. She said, “[the solution is] educate people, educate boys and girls. If you are a girl or a woman,

believe in yourself that you can do the same. And especially for kids because they are the future so if you change their minds - it is important to change the minds and keep educating people.”

Several other women described the need to increase awareness about laws and the possibility for institutional changes to better support women. Elizabeth stated that giving women the knowledge about what is available to help and protect them was needed. She said, “I think we have laws to protect women, but I think they are not made public for us, so we are not aware how to fight back when we have been done an injustice.” Natalia said there needs to be “more help from the government and institutions and more strategies to help people to move forward.”

Finally, several women discussed particular institutions such as cooperatives being a possible solution to help women. For a number of women, being part of a cooperative has made a significant impact on their lives, opening more choices and possibilities for them to earn an income, learn new skills, and even in some cases, help change their communities. In the next chapter I discuss several cooperative institutions in Costa Rica, examining women’s experiences as members and what they described as the possibilities cooperatives may provide as sites for women to mitigate or remedy some of the challenges they face.

CHAPTER IV

COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATIONS IN COSTA RICA

Introduction to Cooperative Associations

Cooperatives are defined by the International Co-operative Alliance as being “independent associations of individuals voluntarily united to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs through jointly-owned and democratically controlled enterprises.” Members actively participate in setting policies and making decisions as to how the cooperative is run and what is done with the capital raised (International Co-operative Alliance (ICA), n.d.-b). These businesses and organizations are also generally imbedded within their communities and made up of local community members, and therefore have a stake in and concern for the betterment of those communities.

While cooperatives are an important part of many local communities around the world, they also play an increasingly significant role in the global economy as well. A recent census report commissioned by the United Nations highlighted the important role cooperatives play in our world economy. Cooperatives have generated 2.98 trillion USD in annual revenue, with the 300 largest co-operatives accounting for 2.2 trillion USD in turnover (i.e. income generated from business activities) (Dave Grace Associates, 2014). These numbers are significant; if they were a single economic unit, cooperatives would be the 5th largest economy in the world (Dave Grace Associates, 2014).

With the growing presence of cooperatives worldwide, there has been increasing attention paid to the significance of the model. The United Nations (UN) General Assembly has formally recognized the power cooperatives can hold in helping meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has

said, “cooperatives are a reminder to the international community that it is possible to pursue both economic viability and social responsibility” (Mills & Davies, 2013, 5).

The attention on the cooperative model has also increased following the global financial collapse of 2008 and the ensuing turbulence of the world’s economic systems. The negative effects of this crisis have been well documented and felt by many across the globe. Following the collapse, governments have cut social and public spending, leaving citizens ever more vulnerable to continued economic turbulence, while at the same time, growing inequality and shifting economic power has had substantial social impacts in many countries. There are considerable numbers of people who believe the cooperative model may be able to play a significant role in tackling our social and environmental problems while at the same time promoting economic development opportunities to those who have felt powerless in the world economy (Mills & Davies, 2013).

The number of cooperatives in developed and developing countries is substantial, with the UN census report putting the figure at 2.6 million cooperatives worldwide with a total of over 1 billion members (Dave Grace Associates, 2014). This equates to 1 in every 6 people in the world being a member or client of a cooperative. In Latin America, there is a long and robust history, with cooperative activity in the region dating back to the 19th century. Today cooperatives are an important source of employment in many Latin American countries and make significant contributions to their economic and social development.

A Cooperatives Europe report (2015), highlighted successful Latin American cooperatives and explained that they play an important role in empowering communities to access and manage essential services such as water, energy, affordable housing and

health care. Costa Rica was one of the countries showcased in this report due to the many cooperatives in the country that have successfully implemented the cooperative business model to enhance citizen and community welfare (Shaw, Alldred, Brander, & Romenteau, 2015). According to the National Institute for Cooperative Development (INFOCOOP), 21 percent of Costa Rica's population belongs to the country's nearly 600 cooperatives and these cooperatives account for over 210,000 jobs (Instituto Nacional de Fomento Cooperativo, 2012).

Costa Rica also has a strong presence of women-focused cooperative associations and these institutions often play an important role in creating jobs and income for women. They can also offer flexibility for those who have children and other responsibilities, and they may open up opportunities for gaining skills and taking on leadership roles. Often, these can also be sites of empowerment where women make decisions and gain a sense of agency. I visited a variety of women's cooperative associations and this chapter explores the data I collected from participant observations and questionnaires with cooperative members and employees.

Cooperative Associations in Costa Rica

While I was traveling throughout Costa Rica I saw evidence of the importance of cooperative associations in most every place I visited. There were cooperative banks, grocery stores, and farm equipment stores, as well as coffee and artisan cooperatives, in most of the rural and urban places I traveled to. I also saw signs and billboards in many cities, as well as advertisements for cooperatives on many of the covered bus stops throughout the cities and towns I traveled. For this project I was interested in examining cooperative associations as alternative economic institutions whose models are based on

a shared set of basic principles and values, such as self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity, honesty, social responsibility, and caring for others (International Co-operative Alliance (ICA), n.d.-a). These institutions are very different from other privately held companies because they are beholden to their members and their community rather than to CEOs and shareholders, and they are driven by a shared set of values rather than solely profit. I was particularly interested in examining women's experiences with these economic institutions and therefore visited four different organizations in Costa Rica. Two of these four were women's associations and two were cooperatives, yet all organizations operated by the same principles and values as listed above.

Association is a very broad term that incorporates all types of alliances, leagues, cooperatives, unions, etc., and is defined as a type of organization where people with common interests come together for a common cause or specific purpose (BusinessDictionary, 2016; Internal Revenue Service, 2017). *Cooperatives* are a type of association that share internationally agreed upon principles and are defined as “independent associations of individuals voluntarily united to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs through jointly-owned and democratically controlled enterprise” (International Co-operative Alliance (ICA), n.d.-b). Members actively participate in setting policies and making decisions as to how the cooperative is run and what is done with the capital raised, and each member gets only one vote, regardless of how large their landholdings or how much money they have. In addition, these associations are generally imbedded within their societies and made up of local

community members, therefore they have a stake in and concern for the betterment of their communities.

Going forward, I will use the term *cooperative associations* when discussing the data collected from the cooperatives and associations in this study.

Background on Cooperative Associations

Cooperative associations have a long history, a large and growing membership, and are an important avenue for the inclusion of small shareholders into global markets, where competition from large corporations with access to capital, have a sizable advantage over individual small producers. By joining together to form cooperatives, small producers can overcome some of the risks and challenges in gaining access to these broader markets. As Vásquez-Léon, et al., (2017) write, “Using the strategy of cooperation, smallholders are able to achieve economies of scale, attract wholesale credit sources, and, just as important, create market visibility through branding and product differentiation” (Vásquez-Léon, Burke, & Finan, 2017, p. 4). In addition to creating access to markets, cooperatives are oftentimes sources of employment for many other people and they make significant contributions to the economic and social development of communities and entire countries as well.

In Latin America, there is a long and robust history of cooperative activity in the region dating back to the 19th century. A report released by Cooperatives Europe (2015) highlighted successful Latin American cooperatives and explained the important role they play in empowering communities to access and manage essential services such as water, energy, affordable housing and health care. Costa Rica was one of the countries showcased in this report due to the strong history of cooperatives enhancing the welfare

of Costa Rican citizens (Shaw et al., 2015). According to Costa Rica's National Institute for Cooperative Development (INFOCOOP), there are nearly 600 cooperatives in the country with more than 880,000 people associated with them (Instituto Nacional de Fomento Cooperativo, 2012).

Costa Rica has long prioritized the importance of cooperatives, passing a national law⁹ where Article 1 states, "The establishment and operation of cooperative associations, as one of the most effective means for the economic, social, cultural and democratic development of the inhabitants of the country, is declared of convenience and public utility and of social interest" (La Asamblea Legislativa de la Republica de Costa Rica, 1968). This law also created INFOCOOP, the autonomous institute tasked with providing credit and technical assistance to cooperatives and promoting their development (Reding, 1986), and it required that all cooperatives must allocate at least 6% of their profits to social welfare purposes (Vo, 2016). While this is required by law in Costa Rica, most cooperatives not only meet this 6% number, but they often go beyond it due to the shared set of values and principles they are organized around; cooperatives and their members have a genuine concern for the welfare of the communities where they live and work.

For this study, I was particularly interested in examining women's participation in associations and cooperatives, and the outcomes of these interactions as described by the women themselves. In Costa Rica and elsewhere in the world, the gender gap in labor force participation persists, with women facing barriers to employment, discrimination, and unequal pay in work that is more likely to be informal and unprotected, while

⁹ Law 4179 - Ley de Asociaciones Cooperativas

oftentimes also spending two and half times more hours on unpaid labor than men (UN Women, 2015). In a global economic system that has often disproportionately affected women in negative ways, many women have sought out and created alternative ways to support themselves and their families. Cooperatives, with the principles and values previously described – those of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity, honesty, social responsibility, and caring for others – may be poised to play a significant role in this regard. As the International Cooperative Alliance notes,

“The ability of co-operatives to contribute to closing the global gender gap deserves increased attention. There is a need to better understand how co-operative enterprises (could) meet women’s needs as users, members, and workers. This research is foundational in championing the need for greater investment in co-operative enterprises as a means of meeting the gender equality and women’s empowerment goals...and to ensure the integration of women’s empowerment and gender equality considerations in co-operatives”(International Year of Cooperatives, 2012).

It is my intention to contribute to the scholarship on women’s involvement in cooperative associations and the outcomes of this involvement. I aim to examine the role that cooperative associations may play in creating a space within the greater neoliberal political economic system that is more beneficial for women and may contribute to their increasing choices and power over their lives.

In the next sections I discuss background information on the beginnings and growth of women’s cooperatives as well as further review of the benefits women

reportedly experience. I then present the data I collected from interviews with women during my field research at cooperatives in Costa Rica.

Women's Cooperatives

Background

Women's cooperatives also have a long history dating back to 1883 when The Women's League for the Spread of Co-operation (later called the Co-operative Women's Guild) was established first in England and Wales and then in Scotland. This group was created to "provide women with a voice within the movement" which had up to that point been almost exclusively dominated by men (Rochdale Pioneers Museum, n.d.). The Guild also worked to link cooperative women together, providing a network to work together for the improvement of the status of women (Rochdale Pioneers Museum, n.d.). These women made significant contributions in many political arenas related to women's issues such as health and suffrage, successfully pressuring British governments to include a maternity benefit in the 1911 National Insurance Act, pushing for equal pay, and campaigning for infant welfare facilities. Today this group continue their grassroots organizing, focusing on advocacy work for women's and social justice issues, including a campaign to keep healthcare public and one to end female genital cutting (Kidd, 2015).

Women's participation in the cooperative movement has grown significantly since the early days of the Guild. According to a recent report (COPAC, 2015), women now make up 60% of cooperative members in South Africa; they are 95% of the members in consumer cooperatives in Japan; they make up 40% of the leadership positions in cooperatives in Spain; and membership in fashion cooperatives in Italy are

made up of 95% women (Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC), 2015) (Figure 16).



Figure 16: Women's Participation in Cooperatives – (figure credit to Cooperatives, Women, & Gender Equality by the Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives)

Cooperative associations have also been important for women in many rural areas, particularly for small-scale female farmers, who provide some 43% of the agriculture labor force in developing countries and produce significant portions of the world's food crops, yet are most often at a greater disadvantage in accessing land, education, technology, markets, financial services and capital needed to start or grow a successful business (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2012). Cooperative associations can help these women gain access to greater financial and political support and give them access to training and development programs that can increase their production and make them more successful (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2012).

Why Women’s Cooperative Associations?

Multiple studies have shown that participating in cooperatives can have many benefits for women. One report found that being involved in these forms of collective enterprises can “enable women producers to access resources and markets, develop relationships, and overcome gender constraints” which can then “help them significantly in meeting economic and social goals” (Jones, Smith, & Wills, 2012, p. 2).

Another study (COPAC, 2015) surveyed 600 cooperative stakeholders and found that cooperatives have had a positive impact of women’s inclusion in the labor force, both by providing direct access to employment and by helping them locate affordable and accessible services that facilitate the ability to work (including in fields of housing, healthcare, childcare, and eldercare) (Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC), 2015). Research from the International Labor Organization’s (ILO) Cooperatives Unit shows there are strong links between women’s involvement in cooperatives and poverty reduction, and they reported that women involved in cooperatives tend to earn higher incomes, take on more leadership roles, and report improved social well-being (International Labour Office, 2015). This same study also detailed the ways in which cooperatives contribute to gender equality and women’s economic empowerment, as described in Figure 17.

How Cooperatives Contribute to Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment		
<i>Economic empowerment</i>	<i>Improved work conditions</i>	<i>Social empowerment</i>
Equal access to paid work	Fair and adequate earnings / equal pay for equal value of work	Learning opportunities such as technical skills improvement and management training
Transition opportunities to the formal economy through cooperation	Decent work in safe working conditions	Affordable and accessible goods and services
Access to business capital, financing, and market places	Collective bargaining power	Improved self-esteem and confidence
Access to opportunities to gain skills and knowledge for economic activity	Increased levels of participatory democracy in the workplace	
Economic development in rural areas		

Figure 17: How Cooperatives Contribute to Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment ((figure credit to Cooperatives, Women, & Gender Equality by the Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives)

Just as Costa Rica has been a leader and strong supporter of the cooperative movement in general, they have also seen an increase in the number of women's cooperative associations. There are a variety of types operating in many places throughout the country. From small, rural, women-only coffee and artisan cooperatives and associations to branches of very large co-ed cooperatives, these institutions often play an important role in creating jobs and providing income for women. They can also become catalysts for changing the greater communities in which the cooperatives are located as well.

To examine how women engage with these institutions and to what outcomes for individuals and their community, I draw on the observations, questionnaires and interviews that I conducted at four cooperative associations in four different areas of Costa Rica. As was outlined in the previous section, I also found that overall the cooperative associations I visited had many benefits for communities and for the women who were associated with them.

However, I found differences in the levels of success that each cooperative had in affecting positive change in women's lives and in their communities. It is important to highlight that just as there are nuances to Costa Rica's story in regard to women, there are also nuances to cooperative associations as well. While it may be tempting to romanticize these institutions as a remedy for all the issues women face, they too are all different and dynamic with benefits and limitations.

In the following sections I present case studies of the four cooperative associations I visited, and I highlight the many strengths they possess while also pointing to their possible limitations. The first case I discuss is that of Coopesarapiquí, a

successful coffee cooperative that has been around for a long time and is an important source of jobs, income and support for the local community. I present data from my interview with a long-time member and coffee farmer at Coopesarapiquí, who details the positive aspects of the cooperative. I also bring in the voices of several women who work at Coopesarapiquí and their experiences demonstrate how the positive dimensions may also be mixed with dynamics of gender inequality that negatively affect women. Despite its positive aspects, there may also be challenges and possible limitations to a cooperative such as Coopesarapiquí that is not intentionally focused on the status and plight of women.

In contrast, I then present data from three other cooperative associations that were specifically created by and focused on women. These cases seemed to reveal that this intentionality appears to matter in regard to the changes made in women's lives and in shifting gender ideologies in the family and broader community.

Cooperative Association Case Studies

Coopesarapiquí

Background

Coopesarapiquí is a coffee cooperative comprised of 137 small coffee farmers in the high elevation areas of the San Carlos and Sarapiquí cantons, in northern Costa Rica. The cooperative was founded in 1969 when forty farmers came together seeking a more economically beneficial way of selling their coffee. Rather than relying on a “middleman” to process and sell their coffee to national markets and abroad, they found that by pooling their money and resources together, they could process their own coffee and negotiate better prices for all cooperative members. They also believed that the

cooperative model would be a better way to promote solidarity, mutual help, and giving back to their community.

With the fluctuating global coffee prices, Coopesarapiquí began diversifying its products, seeking new markets for its coffee and gaining distinctions such as Fair-Trade certification. The cooperative recently partnered with OXFAM on a project growing and selling Fair Trade certified yucca chips, and they are working with local cacao farmers to help sell their products to chocolate producers. Additionally, the cooperative has expanded into the tourism sector, creating an offshoot of its main coffee cooperative branch, call *Mi Cafecito Coffee Tour* which provides guests with an up-close look at the cooperative's operations and teaches them how coffee is grown and processed. They also operate a restaurant and souvenir shop for visitors on-site for a tour. Four years ago, Coopesarapiquí partnered with international tourism company, G-Adventures, to help promote these activities. In the time they have been working with G-Adventures, they have seen the number of visitors increase dramatically, from 1,130 people in 2012, to 4,523 in 2016 resulting in a significant increase of revenue from US \$24,930 to US \$131,973 in the same period, making tourism one of the most important aspects of their business (O. Membreño, personal communication, December 12, 2016).

While at Coopesarapiquí over a period of 9 days, I conducted 4 interviews with the following people:

- a woman who is the manager of the tourism department
- a man who is a coffee farmer and on the Board of Directors and is one of the oldest members of the cooperative
- a woman from a local soap and shampoo producing factory that receives support from the cooperative

- a woman from the recycling center that is also supported by the cooperative

In addition to these interviews, I also collected questionnaire information from the General Manager of the cooperative, the main cook in the restaurant at the cooperative, and four women I met during my time in San Miguel de Sarapiquí.

In order to first learn more about the history and structure of Coopesarapiquí, I spoke with William, a local coffee farmer and one of the longest serving members of the cooperative's board of directors.

A Coffee Farmer's Perspective

I met William at the monthly meeting of Coopesarapiquí's eleven-member Board of Directors, where he agreed to an interview before the meeting started. William is the second oldest cooperative member and has been involved with the administration and board for 27 of his 30 years as a member. He talked with me about himself and his family, his thoughts on the cooperative model and on the future of coffee farming.

William had gone to college and then become a professor, but his family had been in the coffee farming business for generations. His father owned a large parcel of land and when died, it had been split up between William and his brothers. When William's brothers decided to sell their plots, William decided he did not want to see the land sold so he bought it from his brothers. He now continues to farm coffee while also working as a professor too. William has two adult children, a daughter and son, but he told me they are not very interested in being coffee farmers. His daughter is a professional in another sector and his son is more interested in cows than in coffee because they are worth more. William hopes his son will take over the coffee farm when he can no longer do it, but

says he isn't sure this will be possible, telling me, "Now it's very different, the young men prefer other areas because with the coffee it's very hard to make a living now." With the increased competition from global markets and fluctuating coffee prices, where in a period of 15 years the price for coffee went from 200 dollars per quintal to 40 dollars, it is much more uncertain than it once was (Ramírez, 2015). William stated that this is part of the reason he and the other members work to improve the cooperative by diversifying and looking for new products and new markets, saying, "In every meeting, when all the farmers come, they invite their sons to come here and learn about coffee because we want them to be part of the coffee business." The members are trying to motivate them, to teach them the importance of the cooperative model, to make them "feel like it is better to work with coffee," than to work in other businesses, William said.

William then went on to tell me how important he feels this cooperative is to his community. He said the cooperatives in San Miguel de Sarapiquí have been critical to its development, stating that,

"We have the most cooperatives in this area, the most in all of Costa Rica and now we have this area because of the coops. Thanks to the coops we are growing and now it is modern here. We have electricity because the cooperatives are here. This is clean, hydroelectric energy that is cheaper and more sustainable for the environment. It is here because of the cooperatives in this area."

William also told me of his thoughts about the cooperative model and why he feels it is such an important model. "All the coffee farmers are equal," he told me, "even if you don't produce as much. You can be the biggest producer in the coop but that doesn't mean you get more votes, it's equal – the same opinion, the same respect, we are all

helping each other.” He continued on, talking about the benefits, saying, “I love this model because we are all supporting each other, we are supporting the other coops because we are all part of the same model and all trying to help. The benefit is here in this community – more jobs, more economy, more money stays with the local people. It gives people jobs and supports their families.”

William spoke more specifically about the ways in which the cooperative works to improve the community, saying they have committees that look for projects the cooperative can help with. They support local schools and work with women’s groups. One group he talked about was the women organizing a shampoo and soap manufacturing business and he said that while they wish they could give more and do more, they are able to provide funding to help start the business which will provide these women with 20 jobs that wouldn’t otherwise exist. He told me, “Without the coop, it wouldn’t just affect the coffee farmers, it would affect the community because many people wouldn’t have jobs and the community wouldn’t be as good.”

As I said goodbye to William I shared with him that I believe there is a deep need for more cooperatives in the United States and I am doing this research with the intention of raising awareness about the benefits of this model. He told me, “Yes, because you have the resources in your country, but you just have to work in teams. Here it is the opposite – we wish to support and work together; Costa Ricans have very much *solidaridad!*”¹⁰

¹⁰ Solidaridad translates to solidarity.

Mutual Benefits – Cooperative & Community

As William expressed, there is a feeling of solidarity which was shared by others in the San Miguel area where the cooperative is involved in the community in many ways. It is active in funding local school projects, helping a local wood artisan find markets for his products, and partnering with two women's organizations to offer support as they establish their businesses. One group is starting a small business called Naturica, which produces herbal soaps and shampoos from indigenous medicinal plants which the women grow and take care of in their homes. Coopesarapiquí has helped with the funding for the machinery needed in the factory as well as selling the women's products in their souvenir shop. They have also helped the group navigate the process for obtaining the permits needed from the health department, so they are able to sell their products to a wider market.

The other group of four women operate a small recycling business and the cooperative provides the large trucks and transports the recyclable materials to the closest center where the women sell these materials to earn extra income for their families. The cooperative also saves out all its recyclables for the women and it helps promote the importance of recycling in the community as well. I spoke with Marta from Naturica and Saily from the recycling center and each woman talked of the importance of having the cooperative's help with their projects. Saily told me, "We are single moms, so this job provides some extra money for us. It is good and good for the area, the community. We are proud for this reason. It is a lot of work, we have to work hard to sort and organize, but it is good for the community because we are recycling all the things of the community. It is a big help to the community." She also told me that the cooperative has

been very helpful to them, saying, “We would have to rent a truck, but the cooperative gives the transfer for free to get to the next city to sell the materials.”

In addition to assisting the community, Coopesarapiquí is also an employer in a fairly rural area where finding decent work can be difficult. Mi Caficito Coffee Tour provides steady, good paying jobs for 14 local people who work either in the processing plant, in the main office overseeing the day-to-day business, or working in the tourism department (in the kitchen, conducting tours, or in the gift shop). This staff includes six women, of which I spoke to three about their thoughts on working at the cooperative. All three women spoke of the cooperative as being a good source of steady employment in their area, and two of the women held management positions. While Costa Rica has seen progress in the overall number of women participating in the labor force, with the gap between men and women falling by 1% per year since the 1990s, women have continued to be underrepresented in higher paying and management positions. As of 2014, only 33% of management positions are held by women in Costa Rica and there has been roughly no change in this number from 2000 to 2014 (Falco, 2016). In this regard, having these two women holding management positions in the cooperative is significant.

Sofia, one of the women I spoke with, told me she believes one solution to some of the economic problems women face is to have more cooperatives for women, and to have more women as members in cooperatives, as well as other types of organizations and projects focused on women. She said cooperatives are more personal places where the people matter more and where women can be managers more easily.

While the women directly employed by Coopesarapiquí, as well as those in the community who partnered with the cooperative described many positive aspects of their

involvement, they also described some of the challenges they continue to face as well. Despite the opportunities for women to move into management positions at this cooperative, as had Sofia and Gabriela, they both faced problems with discrimination in their positions. Sofia shared her experiences of incidents of discrimination by her male co-workers as rooted in their dislike of a woman in a management position above them. Gabriela also said she thinks sexual harassment at work and discrimination of women in management positions is a major challenge for her and other women in Costa Rica.

Additionally, many here spoke of the broader issues that women in their community face, including difficulty in finding affordable childcare options and a lack of time for themselves. Mariana lamented about being so busy at work and then at home caring for her household that she was unable to do many of the things she wanted. Part of this, Mariana explained, was that she wanted additional training in computer use which would increase her skills and enhance her marketability. She said this might lead to a better paying job than a cook, yet she was so busy that she did not have any time left for this training.

So, while Coopesarapiquí was indeed delivering many benefits to its employees, its members, and the community, there are still deeper issues of prescribed gender ideologies and discrimination that women face, despite the model of cooperatives being a positive alternative political economy for women. This case study is a significant one for highlighting the important history of cooperative associations in Costa Rica. It also points to the important role they play in communities' and individual's lives and demonstrates some of the advantages there can be for women involved in cooperatives as well. However, as is seen with some of the problems the women at Coopesarapiquí describe,

there are limitations to institutions' ability to bring about significant changes to the broader constraints on equality that women face. One possible explanation for this may lie in the intention of the cooperative association. I turn next to a discussion of the cooperative institutions I visited that were specifically focused on women's situations and experiences.

Women-Focused Cooperative Associations

Whereas Coopesarapiquí was not focused specifically on gender dynamics or empowerment of women, the next three cooperative associations I visited were very intentionally responding to gender issues and were focused specifically on women and the creation of economic and leadership opportunities for them. In the next sections I introduce each of these cooperative institutions and describe the ways in which they very intentionally set out to improve women's lives.

CASEM (Cooperativa de Artesanas de Santa Elena y Monteverde)

Background

The Cooperativa de Artesanas de Santa Elena y Monteverde (CASEM), is located in Monteverde, a tourist town of about 7,000 people situated in the famous Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, a biodiverse, high-altitude rainforest that is literally "in the clouds" much of the time. Known for its abundant wildlife and plant species, people come from all over the world to hike through suspended bridges that allow for views of the forest from above the canopy. There are also many environment-focused organizations in the area conducting research, carrying out reforestation projects, and providing education on sustainable management practices. One organization, the Monteverde Conservation League, helped create Costa Rica's largest private nature reserve in the area, called the

Children’s Eternal Rainforest, which covers 54,000 acres (Monteverde Info, 2011).

Monteverde is a remote town with dairy farming, agriculture, and tourism as its major industries.

CASEM was founded in 1982 by a group of eight women who were looking for ways to improve the economic situations for themselves and their families. This group of women was led by Patricia Jiménez, who had gone to college in San Jose and “came back [to Monteverde] with a mindset very different from a lot of women who had grown up [here]” (N. Gómez, personal communication, December 20, 2016). Jiménez organized with other women to create artwork they could sell to tourists visiting Monteverde, first in her kitchen and then later in their own store. The women turned the cooperative into a flourishing business and there are now about 100 members selling their products in a beautiful storefront. In addition, not only does the cooperative allow for women to earn an income while working from home, but it also promotes continuing education, providing trainings for women in new art techniques and in business management skills, as well as hosting workshops in problem solving, conflict resolution, and confidence building (Leitinger, 1997; Monteverde Info, 2011).

A Founding Member’s Perspective

While I was visiting CASEM, I had the opportunity to interview the current Director, Doña Nery,¹¹ who is also one of the original group of eight women who founded the cooperative in 1982. Doña Nery was a very pleasant woman in her early 60s who was happy to talk with me about her childhood, the cooperative’s beginnings, and its impact

¹¹ This interview was conducted with the assistance of a translator. See methods section for more information.

on her and the community of Monteverde. She told me that she had not been allowed to finish school because she was a girl, saying,

“I went to school for a little while until I was able to read and write because that’s what my dad considered most important. And then he said, ‘that’s it, that’s all you really need to know’ because I was just going to be taking care of kids. But all of my brothers did go to college and got degrees, but because I was a woman I wasn’t able to do that.”

This was very similar to many other women she knew, and Doña Nery spoke of the difficulty she and the other women faced in overcoming pressure by their husbands and society to remain in their prescribed role when they wanted to join the cooperative.

“The situation was very different back then because the women’s roles were mostly to stay at home, take care of the children, and not work [outside the home]. It was hard at the beginning because we had to inspire women to do artwork and make handmade things they learned from their grandparents. It was sometimes hard because certain women had trouble with their husbands and they had to do it secretly.”

When I asked what she meant by “trouble,” she told me that the husbands did not want their wives to work. She said, “The main goal of the cooperative was to be able to help women have an income and be able to earn a living while they were still at home, so they wouldn’t have to go somewhere to work. In the beginning, there was nothing set in stone because we didn’t want to create conflict in the families, so the women would come and go.” Even so, she told me, there were still some conflicts and, when I asked why, she said,

“It was a sexist culture. The women were very obedient to whatever the man said. [The husbands] thought that by having all of these women coming together, it would give them suggestions of rebelling against the way it was, so they didn’t like that. It meant the women were entering this organization without their [husband’s] permission.”

Alicia experienced this personally, saying that because her husband was “very sexist” and did not want her to work, it had been difficult for her to join as well. She told me that luckily her sister-in-law had been very strong-willed and talked her into going, saying she would step in for Alicia if anything happened with her husband. Alicia is happy she ended up joining as it has been a life-changing experience for her and she is now the Director of the cooperative. She told me proudly,

“Even though I did not go to school, I don’t have a degree, and I am not a professional, I have learned so much being part of the cooperative. Coming here to the cooperative, I am responsible for this whole place. I have learned all of that here.”

She spoke with me about the changes she has seen with the other women as well, telling me about the positive economic effects for the women and their families. She explained that being part of this business has given women the skills, finances, and confidence to conduct business in other ways too. “If they have a farm they are now able to buy a cow and then sell the cow, so they can buy another. It has helped with them getting into that business. Even if it’s as simple as creating a bakery and selling homemade bread or using a sewing machine and offering their services, it creates a lot of opportunities for the women.” She also explained that the women’s participation has been positive for their

families as well. “They have been able to help their kids go to school and help be more of a support to their families,” she told me.

Alicia also talked about the changes in the culture she has seen since the cooperative started. In regard to the sexist culture she spoke of earlier, Alicia thinks the cooperative has created changes in this culture. She spoke of an art exhibition they held in their gallery for the women artists to display their work. She said the event was very well attended and, for the husbands, it was a big surprise.

“It was a big surprise for a lot of men who had never seen their wives’ work. They realized that they had never viewed their wives like that – that not only were they taking care of their homes, but she was also a great person who could create and could also help with the income of the family.”

For the women themselves, Alicia told me that being part of the cooperative has resulted in not only the extra income that benefits their families, but also a change in the women. She said there has been an increasing presence of women and an involvement in their communities.

“For women, it’s a very different reality now because now they are modern women, they are very busy women. They are not only creating art to sell here but they are also involved in different parts of the community like committees at school or churches. They are very involved because now they know that their voices will be heard.”

Before I left, Alicia acknowledged that there are still many issues that women face, she spoke of a “culture where men feel like they can’t let women go over them” and of hiring practices that discriminate against women because they are too old or because they are

young and may get pregnant. She told me that at the cooperative, women's self-esteem is very important and she believes the cooperative is making a significant difference in women's lives and in the culture of her community. She told me, "There are still women living in that situation – the sexist situation – and I hope that eventually they all will be able to find their way here."

AMASIA (Asociación de Mujeres Artesanas San Isidro de Atenas)

Background

The Asociación de Mujeres Artesanas San Isidro de Atenas¹² (AMASIA) is located in San Isidro de Atenas, a small city of about 5,000 people, just west of San José in the Province Alajuela. AMASIA was started by two women in 1993 first as a small initiative to understand, learn, and disseminate crafts for women in the Atenas region of central Costa Rica. Later it expanded into a productive women's organization specializing in horticultural activities.

The women at AMASIA grow and sell specialty orchids, cacti and other ornamental plants which many businesses buy to use in landscaping projects. This project has been profitable for the women and they have expanded their business, now selling bread, empanadas, and other Costa Rican foods, as well as hosting tours of the nursery, holding cooking classes, and selling their plants, food items, and members' artwork at local craft fairs.

Today the women have over 1,000 plants including 34 different varieties of orchids and their nursery is one of the largest plant conservation initiatives in the Atenas area. University students visit the organization to learn more about their plants and

¹² Translates to *The Association of Women Artisans of San Isidro de Atenas*

volunteers come to help the women with horticulture and infrastructure projects. The organization currently provides a supplemental income for the nine women involved, as well as offering a space for community building and friendship (AMASIA, documents obtained in personal interview, December 22, 2016).

A Founding Member's Perspective

At AMASIA, I met with Ana Lucia Fernandez, who is the Co-founder and Director of the organization¹³. Doña Ana Lucia described some of the problems she believes women in Costa Rica face, echoing what so many other women told me. “Although we have acquired more rights, there is always a great divide between men and women. Although we try to achieve equality, men continue to benefit more - from a higher salary to preferring to give a job to the male population.” This points to the persistent cultural and gender dynamics that women consistently face.

Doña Ana Lucia told me that AMASIA is trying to change the situation for women in her community, and she described the ways in which the organization is doing this. She said that as members of AMASIA, the women learn valuable skills related to caring for and propagating the many different plants they grow. They also learn a variety of other business-related skills as well, including accounting and marketing. They learn about sales, product distribution, and public relations too. “Through all of this,” she told me, “the women of AMASIA have been motivated to earn a good living doing what they

¹³ Although I had planned for an in-depth interview with Doña Ana Lucia, the interview ended up being very difficult to conduct as there was no translation help available and, although I speak some Spanish, I was only able to understand some of what Doña Ana Lucia said. Additionally, I did record the interview (with her consent), but I had technical difficulties with my recording device and ended up losing most of the hour and a half interview. I was able to recover some of the interview and I received written materials from Doña Ana Lucia which gave me background information on their organization and information from the women who are members of AMASIA which described the importance of the organization in their lives.

love and being able to care for their families. AMASIA has been a way for women to do that.” Doña Ana Lucia also said that she feels AMASIA has been beneficial to the greater community as well, providing a space for teaching and learning through the community courses they provide. She said AMASIA is a gathering place for the community to learn and grow together.

ASOMOBI (Asociación de Mujeres Organizadas de Biolley)

Background

The Asociación de Mujeres Organizadas de Biolley (ASOMOBI) is located in the southern part of Costa Rica, in a very rural area near the village of Biolley. This organization was created in 1997 when a group of eight local women came together looking for solutions to the economic problems they faced. During that time, the area had been hit very hard by falling coffee prices and a global recession. Many of the men had to leave the area in search of work in the cities or in other countries. The women, who up until this point had primarily worked within their homes caring for their households and children, were left with little resources. They decided to start some kind of business to support their families and tried many different things such as arts and sewing projects. They quickly discovered that this would not bring them enough money as there were few customers in their remote village. There were, however, many coffee farmers in the area and because some of the women had grown up around coffee, they knew a bit about planting and picking. They decided they would learn how to mill and roast the coffee themselves, and they persuaded the farmers to plant high quality coffee and bring it to the women instead of sending it to another town to be milled. They learned through trial and error (terribly burning their first batches) how to roast coffee and then reached out to

banks and other funding sources until they had enough to build a small mill on their current site. Throughout this process they continuously contacted Grace Mena, the only female coffee exporter in the entire country, until she agreed to help them. Through hard work and perseverance these women established the first female-run micro-mill in all of Costa Rica. Their focus is on producing the highest quality coffees in a sustainable manner and they now sell their specialty coffee in many businesses throughout Costa Rica and are looking to expand into international markets in the future as well (S. Arauz, personal communication, January 3, 2017; Chilcott, 2015).

ASOMOBI is very important to the women and their community. This could be seen in a documentary that was created to highlight the women's tenacity in overcoming adversity and creating a sustainable business. The 2015 film, *A Small Section of the World*, describes the story of ASOMOBI as one of "passion and tenacity, about women's empowerment, the risky business of coffee and how a cup of coffee can transform lives" (Chilcott, 2015).

The women of ASOMOBI are currently working on a variety of different projects as well. In addition to coffee roasting, the women now keep bees and sell the honey produced, they make and sell jewelry and crafts in the main office of ASOMOBI, and they have expanded into the tourism industry as well, building a small hotel and a restaurant on the site of their mill and roastery. The women give tours of the mill and, to bring in additional tourists, they have also collaborated with organizations working in the nearby park, La Amistad International Park, where ASOMOBI coordinates amphibian and bird watching tours for travelers who are accessing the park entrance that is very close to ASOMOBI's offices. The women also work to improve the community of

Biolley, leading several projects such as constructing a communal kitchen in the town center which is used for community events. They have also started projects for collecting garbage and promoting recycling, some of which is used in the women's handicrafts, and they are working with the farmers and community on water conservation projects.

A Member's Perspective

While at ASOMOBI, I toured the mill and roasting facilities and met with and interviewed Veronica, the organization's Executive Director and the daughter of one of the founding women. Veronica studied Agricultural Engineering and Management at the Technological University of Costa Rica and has been part of ASOMOBI since its founding. Veronica told me about the early days and the initial reactions some of the men had to the women working. She said, "In the beginning there were 15 members and then some of them left the organization because of machismo, so there were 9 women left."

When I asked her why, she explained:

"It was really difficult for some of [the husbands]. There were some husbands who told their wives to help them, that they should work too, but there were many that didn't like it that their wives were working. [The husband] stayed at home and didn't eat or cook and so the women had to go back to their homes."

Veronica also spoke of the challenges that many women in her area and in Costa Rica face. "There is not equality in working between the women and men," she said, "and they do not receive equal salaries" with women being paid much less than men. She also talked about women not being able to get an education, not being able to finish high school and go to college. And she spoke briefly about the problem of machismo culture and how this can hold women back. She told me that the women of ASOMOBI work

hard to change this and to improve the lives of the members and their families. She said ASOMOBI is one of the few organizations in Costa Rica that helps the women first in their formal paperwork. They also promote girls staying in school and going on to college when they graduate.

Veronica then talked about how their numbers have been growing and is now up to 37 members. She said many of the new members are the daughters of the founding members and she explained that ASOMOBI has been very important for these families, with the women being role models for their daughters. “I have seen the effects on the younger women...it is very important for the daughters, they have learned from the mothers. It is a good example.” She also told me about how some of the family dynamics have changed as well, and many of the men now feel differently about the women working. “It changed in the families and now the husbands’ help the women and they say that it’s good that they work here. That has changed a lot in the last years – some of the husbands actually stay at home so the women can work here.”

There has also been a shift in gender expectations of work in the wider community of Biolley. Veronica talked about this saying, “Life has also changed because now in this community all the people are used to all the women working and it wasn’t like that before. That is a big change for the community and country.” Veronica spoke of other ways the women of ASOMOBI have changed, explaining that being involved with the coffee business has been a catalyst for the women to gain skills to do other things and expand their business. “[I have seen] the empowerment of the women to do something to provide an income for their families. Now they’re not just working in ASOMOBI, they’re helping invent small projects like the handicrafts and the honey too.” Additionally,

women in the area feel more hopeful about their future and they now “have the possibilities for their families – if they get the money here they have a better economic situation for the whole family.” They have also been able to travel to other places in the country and the world; learning English with a project at the University of Costa Rica, participating in meetings with the Alianza de Mujeres en Café (Women's Coffee Alliance of Costa Rica) in the capital city, and even traveling to Germany in an exchange program ASOMOBI has been participating in for the previous two years. Veronica said before the women created ASOMOBI they would never have thought there would be these options. “It [ASOMOBI] has changed the possibility for the people from this community to be able to leave the community to visit other parts of the country and the world.”

ASOMOBI is serving as an example for others in Costa Rica as well. Veronica told me they try to replicate their model and what they're doing to help other organizations see what is possible for women. She said they visit other places and organizations and tell them about what is working for ASOMOBI. It is also serving as an example for all women in their community and for the young girls growing up there. She told me proudly, “To have the women here is an example – ASOMOBI serves as an example to other women who may think they are not able to do these things.”

Cooperative Conclusions

While I visited a variety of types of cooperative associations (coffee, artisan, agricultural) in a variety of places (rural and urban areas in the north, central, and southern parts of the country), I heard many of the same stories from the women and men I spoke with. All discussed the importance of these cooperative associations in the fabric of their communities - providing jobs and a way to support their families, providing training and

learning opportunities, partnering with other community members and organizations to support additional economic opportunities, and providing a sense of community, friendship, and a support system. Though most of the women I spoke with described unequal economic and educational opportunities as being significant issues that women in Costa Rica face, many also described cooperative associations as being sites of possibilities for women. From the women at CASEM, who found their voices in the community because of their work as artisans in the cooperative association, and the women at Coopesarapiquí who were able to move into leadership positions, to the women at ASOMOBI who worked together tirelessly to build the first female-run, micro coffee mill in Costa Rica, I heard hopeful stories of women persevering and finding ways to work within a culture that often discriminates against them because of their gender. Additionally, I also heard that their perseverance and hard work at times shifted ideas, behaviors and expectations in their relationships and communities.

Although there were indeed limitations to the extent to which cooperative associations can solve all gender problems, as was seen in the case of Coopesarapiquí, there is also reason to be hopeful that cooperative associations can make a difference in the lives of women. The purpose of the cooperative associations may matter greatly, with institutions that are intentionally focused on solving women's issues more successful in creating positive change in women's lives and in the culture of their communities. While women in Costa Rica still face many issues to attaining full equality and living a life free from violence, they have also shown that they are resourceful and strong, willing to create opportunities that open their possibilities while still fitting in with the many other responsibilities they have as well. Perhaps learning from and helping to support these

types of institutions can lead to broader changes in Costa Rican culture that may close the gap between the dominant story and women's lived experiences.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In many ways Costa Rica has been a successful and unusual country. In 1948, then President Jose Figueres stood outside the looming building of the national military headquarters and took a sledgehammer to its wall, physically knocking a hole in it while announcing that the country would no longer have a national army. This was followed by him giving the building's keys to the Minister of Education, in a symbolic move that represented where the country's focus would be instead (Barash, 2013). Years later, in a 1987 address to the United States Congress, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias eluded to this decision and the overall values the Costa Rican people hold dear when he said,

"I belong to a small country that was not afraid to abolish its army in order to increase its strength. In my homeland you will not find a single tank, a single artillery piece, a single warship or a single military helicopter.... Today we threaten no one, neither our own people nor our neighbors. Such threats are absent not because we lack tanks but because there are few of us who are hungry, illiterate or unemployed" (Barash, 2013, 1).

While the accomplishments of the country are significant, and Costa Rica has much to celebrate, it is important to remember that there is never just one story about a place, but instead there are multiple layers and complexities. Overlooking this complexity in favor of a single narrative is dangerous, as it flattens and simplifies experiences (Adichie, 2009). This simplification means you miss much of the details of people's lived experiences. It also leaves unheard the voices of individuals and the rich and diverse knowledge they have. Additionally, it works to silence those whose experiences do not

conform to the singular narrative, and in so doing, may render invisible the violence that people experience.

While Costa Rica was once a country that backed up its talk of exceptionalism with progressive social policies and safety nets, including funding for education, healthcare and pensions, the shift to neoliberalism in the 1980s threatened the state-led institutionalized support for the prosperity of all Costa Ricans. In the face of mounting debt and pressure from international lenders, Costa Rica began privatizing state-run industries and cutting funding for programs that benefitted and supported its citizens. Since this time, the country has seen large increases in prosperity for the country's elites and foreign investors amidst growing inequality within Costa Rica. Though women have increasingly joined the workforce, which is often touted as empowering and beneficial, they have done so in part due to falling wages for men and rising costs of living forcing them to seek additional sources of income. However, even as women may work more outside the home and have more economic independence than previous times, gender ideologies have largely remained unchanged and women are still discriminated against, still responsible for the work at home, all while many women experience the effects of increasing rates of violence and harassment. However, the persistence of the dominant story of Costa Rica's exceptionalism continues despite women's experiences and the statistics that run counter to it.

With this project, I was curious about exploring this narrative with particular attention to the seeming disjuncture between the dominant story of Costa Rica and what women in the country stated about their experiences. I set out to go beyond the positive statistics of Costa Rica and explore some of the nuances of the country in order to better

understand the status of women there and how they understand their own lives and experiences. I did so by centering the voices of women to better understand what social and economic issues they experience and how these issues impact their lives. I also focused on cooperative associations and women's connections to these institutions as alternative ways to do business within the global capitalist system that might offer different kinds of opportunities or better outcomes for women and communities.

Women's Voices

What I heard from women in Costa Rica echoed many of the findings from reports that show women are doing less well than men across a number of measures (or something like this...needs some specificity), and that their experiences often do not match the country's reputation as a peaceful, egalitarian place. Despite Costa Rica's progressive policies, including passage of national legislation and participation in significant global treaties aimed at protecting women, almost all the women I spoke with talked about discrimination, harassment and violence as something they experienced personally or as a serious issue they saw impacting women's lives. They spoke of employers not hiring them because they were either too old or because they would be seen as a liability if and when they got pregnant. They spoke of gender stereotypes and a machismo culture that taught them to 'know their place' as a woman when they were in public or dealing with business, and of being harassed by men on the streets.

These kinds of discrimination and harassment in public spaces are a serious problem in Costa Rica, with one 2016 report finding that 6 out of 10 women said they

had been victims of sexual harassment¹⁴ (Arias, 2016b) and another noting that the number of complaints of sexual harassment in public increased 70 percent from 2014 to 2015 (Anders, 2017a). Women's groups have been hard at work on a public campaign with billboards, signs on busses, and television ads to bring awareness to the issue and to inform women where to file a complaint should this happen to them. They are also pushing for passage of a tougher law against this sexual harassment, which is currently considered only a minor offense with many hoops to jump through for the victim (Arias, 2016b).

Many women also told me that domestic violence is a serious issue in Costa Rica. Although it is difficult to get accurate statistics on the prevalence of this violence and whether it is actually occurring more frequently now or is just being reported more, there are some reports that say it is on the rise. One noted that the number of women being treated at public hospitals for domestic violence increased by one-third from 2013 to 2016 (Arias, 2016a) and another reported that on average around 50,000 women per year have sought legal protections from their abusers in recent years, which gives some indication of the size of the problem (Villarreal, 2014). Accurate statistics on the prevalence of violence is difficult to obtain in part because violence against women often remains a private issue. One woman I met told me that, "if things like [violence] do happen, they're very intimate with the family, they're not the kind of things that [women] will just talk about because no one likes to hear about those things."

¹⁴ This harassment includes things like catcalling, vulgar gestures, leering, groping, purposefully rubbing up against someone, indecent exposure and preventing a person from passing in a public space (Arias, 2016b).

In addition to not being talked about, many women may not report violence because very often perpetrators are not held responsible. While laws are in place in Costa Rica making violence against women illegal, the number of cases that actually result in convictions is very low. According to the Observatory on Gender Violence Against Women, the dismissal rate for cases brought to the courts was 88.74% in 2016 (Observatory on Gender Violence against Women and Access to Justice, 2016a). Having to go through the difficult process of bringing a case against your abuser just to have it be dismissed, makes it difficult for any woman to want to use the court system. There are, however, efforts under way to address this with the Public Ministry, criminal courts, domestic violence courts, and other offices of the Judiciary to improve the application of the 2007 Violence Against Women Law so more women feel protected by the justice system (Observatory on Gender Violence against Women and Access to Justice, 2016a). This plan includes a media campaign promoting respect for women that is aimed at children and young men, and increased support for victims, including heightened police response, social assistance, judicial protection measures and legal counsel (Arias, 2017). These measures will only be successful if the government properly funds them so that they reach all parts of Costa Rica, not just the urban areas. Women must feel the justice system is working for them in order for the many laws Costa Rica has passed to be meaningful.

The women I spoke with also described this lack of confidence in the legal system. Many told me that while there are laws in place, they are not followed, such as in the case of employers discriminating against women in hiring practices. Others, particularly those in rural areas, told me that the laws don't support women or that

women are not aware of the laws that are available to protect them. Reports also note the particular concerns for women in rural areas as well (Anders, 2017b; Arias, 2016a; Lopez, 2014). In and around the capital city of San Jose there are many women's organizations, resources, and campaigns to expand awareness of these issues and the laws in place to protect women. However, rural areas are places where violence is highest while at the same time resources are lacking (Inter-Agency Task Force on Rural Women, 2013). One report noted that the rural Guanacaste province in the northern part of Costa Rica had the highest rate of domestic violence in the country (Lopez, 2014). A sociologist interviewed for the report noted these high rates stem from "the lack of government institutions that can help individuals and families to deal with certain issues that escalate into abuse," and she cited low levels of education, high unemployment, isolation of homes spread out in rural communities, and a more prevalent machismo culture, as being problematic as well (Lopez, 2014).

Although Costa Rica has enacted many laws and signed onto regional and global treaties that strive to protect women's rights to live free from violence, this must mean more in the everyday lives of women to stop the violence, discrimination, and harassment they continue to face. A recent UN CEDAW Committee Report for Costa Rica pointed out concerns with the persistence of gender-based violence in public and private, the low conviction rates compared to the high number of complaints, and the large number of sexual harassment cases reported by women (UN CEDAW Committee, 2015; Anders, 2017b). They urged the Costa Rican government to do more in this regard, especially in the area of access to justice, which they note as a serious concern. They recommend the

establishment of alternative dispute resolution centers for women free of charge, as well as more coverage of legal aid clinics and legal advocacy services (Anders, 2017b).

I would also suggest that the government of Costa Rica focus more on its rural areas where the highest incidences of violence occur. This focus could include awareness raising and educational campaigns, as well as providing additional funding for resource centers that help women gain access to the court systems without having to travel great distances to the larger cities. This is an extreme barrier for many women in rural areas who, due to a combination of gender ideologies, male dominance, and economic dependency, often do not have access to their own money or who may not drive or have their own resources to travel somewhere in order to seek help. For example, the women I stayed with in rural northern Costa Rica did not work outside the home, did not have independent access to money, and could not drive because they did not have a vehicle, a license, and had not learned how to do so. For women in situations like this and others who face barriers to travel for help, those resources should be more readily available where they are, and the government must do more to ensure this access – simply passing laws is not enough.

The UN CEDAW Committee also discussed serious concerns regarding persistent stereotypes and discriminatory practices in Costa Rica, including those about “the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and in society” (Anders, 2017b, 2). Almost every woman with who I spoke brought this up in some form. Some described the subtle ways in which they were controlled – by being “guilt-tripped” by their husbands into not being able to do what they wanted or go where they wanted, by not being able to get the education they wanted, or by having to do certain jobs and not being able to do

others because they were female. Women described a “machismo” culture that created and perpetuated these stereotypes. They explained how they had been made to quit school because they were told an education is not needed if your only role is to take care of others as a wife and mother. They reported being made to clean up after their male family members and do all of the household chores from an early age because they were female. They described how they had to ask their husbands for money and they said they didn’t like this. They reported that men believe that men are above women, smarter than them, able to do jobs which women cannot; they thought many women have internalized these beliefs to some extent as well. This leads to a permissive mentality where men feel they are entitled to do what they want, including what they want with women. They feel they can control them, discriminate against them, harass and even touch them in public, and in extreme cases, commit violent acts against them. With a legal system that is often unresponsive, this sends the message that there are no consequences for men who do this, and it makes it less likely that women will speak out against it.

The persistence of gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices has contributed to a situation where women are often faced with serious economic hardships. I heard this from most of the women I spoke with who talked a great deal about economic issues being some of the biggest problems they face. While many I met were working, they were often in low paying positions and they told me this was because they lacked education or training that was not accessible to them, either because they had not been allowed to finish school due to being female, or because they did not have time to gain additional skills. Several told me that because of the work they were also expected to do at home caring for their families, in addition to the hours they spent at their jobs, they did

not have time for additional training or even for themselves. They also face discrimination and barriers to being hired or to advancing into higher level positions. Even those women I spoke with who were in management positions faced discrimination and had their power questioned and usurped by the men they supervised.

Despite all these barriers, the women I met were working very hard to overcome the obstacles in their lives. Through the creation of and involvement in cooperative associations, many women have been active in improving their economic situations and enhancing the lives of their families and communities. Costa Rica's shift to privatization under neoliberalism altered its priorities and reduced what the state commits to the social wellbeing programs for which it is so well known. This has had negative consequences for many of the country's citizens and Costa Rica has faced rising inequality and poverty that disproportionately affects women. Cooperative associations, however, may be one positive solution that give people an increased voice and additional choices within the constraints of the current global economic system. As William, the coffee farmer from Coopesarapiquí told me, "so many of the people in Costa Rica still feel a *solidaridad* with each other," and cooperative associations are a way for them to earn a living while also working together to create other opportunities for those around them and to build more resilient, thriving communities.

Cooperative associations can also be a way for women to access additional employment choices and gain access to leadership and training opportunities they might not otherwise have in an environment where they often experience discrimination in hiring practices, relegation to low paying and non-management positions, and lack of a voice in decisions that are made. Cooperative associations can offer women a way to earn

an income while also caring for their families, as CASEM does with its members creating their artwork at home rather than having to go out to an office. At AMASIA, the women were able to not only create a thriving business selling plants, but they have also become one of the largest plant conservation initiatives in the area. University teachers and students visit their cooperative association to learn more about them and the work they are doing. At ASOMOBI, the first female-run micro-mill in all of Costa Rica, women are creating and expanding a thriving business while making their communities better and also challenging gender ideologies in the process.

However, as I have stressed throughout this thesis, there is never just a single story, and this is the case for cooperative associations too. While it is true that they do create opportunities for women and cause changes in communities, they are also not immune or separate from the issues of the larger society in which they operate. As we saw with Coopesarapiquí, when women earned supervisory roles, they faced opposition and sexist attitudes from the men they worked with. Additionally, even while the women at the specifically women-focused cooperative associations reported increased earnings and a growing sense of self-efficacy, women must still operate within the constraints of gender ideologies in society - still responsible for the housework and care-work at home, still facing discrimination, and often left yearning for something more than what they currently had.

This notion of wanting something more came through when the women I interviewed shared their hopes for future daughters, which were very different from their own situations. These included futures where daughters were independent, had their own money and didn't have to ask a husband for it; were able to get a good education that

allowed them more choices for meaningful work; were not discriminated against for being a woman and instead were respected and not hurt by any man. In the cooperative associations that were created with the intentionality of expanding opportunities for women, I saw some possibilities for changes to occur at the individual, family and community level. In places like ASOMOBI, the women of the cooperative have been an example for their daughters who feel like they now have more choices. Veronica, the current Director, is also the daughter of one of the founding members, and she went away to college where she earned a degree Agribusiness Engineering before returning to take on a leadership position at the cooperative. She told me she would not have thought she could accomplish that if she had not grown up watching her mother fight to start the cooperative. Additionally, there were indications that in the community where ASOMOBI is embedded, there have also been some shifts in the ideas of what women's "roles" can be – where once many men did not support their wives becoming members, today they have changed their thinking on this and some have taken on additional responsibilities with the household work to help their wives. With ASOMOBI, there is opportunity for this model to spread, as Veronica, has begun traveling to other communities in Costa Rica to share what their cooperative association has done.

Perhaps cooperative associations can be a possibility for women to improve their economic situations while also working to change the gender ideologies in Costa Rica, a country where the government may not readily acknowledge the problems that run counter to the dominant narrative, where these gender ideologies are deeply engrained, and where laws alone have not been effective enough.

Concluding Thoughts

After hearing the women's stories while in Costa Rica and then returning to Eugene and attending the lecture by Oscar Arias, I was deeply impacted by the conversation he had with the young woman in the crowd (relayed in chapter 1). When asked what was being done to protect transgender women in Costa Rica, rather than acknowledging there was any kind of problem, Arias pointed to the great things Costa Rica has done and said, "in my country there is no discrimination... we don't discriminate against anybody" and was defensive and dismissive about the question and the issue. This example is representative of what I have set out to show in this paper – the long history of exceptionalism that Costa Rica has constructed its dominant story upon is reflected in the language and is promulgated by those in power so that stories misaligned with this narrative are often dismissed or not heard. While the government can point to its history, its long list of laws and treaties, and its favorable rankings with aggregated statistics, as proof that Costa Rica is doing very well, the stories I heard from women told of experiences that run counter to or at least complicated this national narrative. There *is* discrimination in Costa Rica. Women experience this in many ways and in many aspects of their lives. Despite the progressive laws that have been passed, women still face many obstacles to living their lives the way they would like.

This points to the fact that domestic and international laws alone are not enough, and they must also be accompanied by open, ongoing discussions of the problems, as well as finding solutions that get at the underlying causal factors of the issues women face. This will mean critically examining poverty and growing inequality in the country once known for its generous social welfare programs, as well as assessing the state's role

in this and their responses. It will also mean critically examining neoliberal policies and their effects on society in general and women in particular, as these policy approaches have contributed to inequality, constrained what is even possible for women, and contributed to increased poverty and rates of violence. In finding solutions, it will be important to bring in all stakeholders, including women from all areas of Costa Rica who have deep knowledge of the issues they face as well as many ideas for solutions. Finally, cooperative associations may also be a key part of the solution as well, offering the possibility of an alternative to neoliberal development models while working within the constraints of the current global economic systems but that have better outcomes for women and may help change cultures of communities as well. Just as the issues women face are wide-ranging and systematic, it will also take a concerted effort at all levels to create meaningful, comprehensive and lasting change for women in Costa Rica.

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