

Title: Women in Solidarity for Development

School: Grinnell College

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PROJECT SUMMARY

My project took place in San Ramon municipality, in the highlands of central Nicaragua, with women from the town of San Ramon and two rural satellite communities, El Plomo and La Amancia. Unemployment is high and most families in San Ramon struggle to survive through subsistence agriculture. However, extreme poverty and the prevalence of machismo results in the majority of families being run by young, single mothers, whose husbands have left them to find work for cash crop plantations or abandoned them entirely in search of other opportunities. Consequently, many of these women must migrate to the cities to find work, living in urban slums and furthering the breakup of rural families.

The project aimed to prevent the breakup of these families and to create opportunities for women to generate a steady income for themselves through the creation of three sewing businesses (or cooperatives). I worked through a local NGO, Centro Promocional Cristiano. The rationale for the sewing business was based on the lack of any such business or industry in the area and the potential of local markets in the communities of San Ramon, as well as the rising number of eco-tourists who pass through the area. The personnel involved include the NGO director Rosario Gonzalez, the sewing instructor Marta García (who had trained in Matagalpa to become a skilled seamstress and lives in San Ramon), representatives of sewing cooperatives from each of the three communities (who were elected by all involved), and myself. My role was to teach, along with Mrs. Gonzalez, about resource administration, basic business skills, and basic math.

The project started in May 2007 and has as its overarching goal that by May 2008, the sewing businesses will be completely self-sufficient, profitable, and managed by the women themselves. This project is funded entirely by 100 Projects for Peace.

PROJECT RESULTS

It looks entirely realistic for the three sewing cooperatives to reach independent, fully operational and profitable status by May 2008. I arranged for the embroidery to be displayed at an eco-lodge, Fundación el Sueño de la Campana, and it sold out in two weeks. Obviously there is a tourist demand. Further, in the first three weeks, the women progressed from simple embroidery to blouse making. Such enthusiasm and hard work of the women are the major reasons for their success. Their will and dedication to the project serve as the driving forces that are turning the business into reality.

There have been changes to the initial project proposal. Instead of the 40 women projected to participate, 52 women and 2 men are the beneficiaries of the project. The structure of the business is already taking form- each community (San Ramon, El Plomo, and La Amancia), has an elected community representative with a high aptitude for leadership, and so far these representatives have done an impressive job as motivators and organizers of the group. Annually, each cooperative will elect a representative as leader. In the proposal, I also projected that as the businesses become more self-sufficient, the women will be able to train others in sewing and embroidery. Indeed, I have talked to all 54 participants, and they consistently told me that a key reason for their participation is to teach others, especially family members and friends, so that they too may have more opportunities for advancement. Some women who could not make class sent their children, as young as 12 years old, who excitedly reported that they were going to teach the rest of the family.

Sewing instructor Marta García's patience, knowledge, and faith in the abilities of her pupils lent a calm, steady presence to the classes, as the women worked all day long on their sewing, often voluntarily skipping lunch. The structure of the classes is as follows: on Wednesdays, Mrs. García gives classes in El Plomo, on Thursdays, she goes to La Amancia, and on Fridays, classes are in the

town of San Ramon. I taught basic math and business for one hour at each class. There are three groups of students: 19 in El Plomo, 22 in La Amancia, and 14 in San Ramon. Mrs. García gave embroidery workshops in May to test the aptitude of the participants, and based on these workshops, the group split their focus on embroidery and traditional clothes (such as togas for festivals in schools, shirts, pants, skirts).

The year-long program that started with embroidery next moves to each type of clothing (blouses, shorts, skirts, togas, and pants respectively), first making the clothing out of paper in order to practice cutting correctly, then moving on to cloth by hand, and finally to sewing machines. Things of value, such as the wooden tables and the sewing machines that have been purchased for the project, will be given to the communities once they finish the program, as an incentive for regular class attendance. Currently they are kept at the site of sewing classes in each community. Each participant was provided with her or his own packet of materials from Project for Peace funds which includes scissors, fabric, thread, a needle, and a ruler, which they must bring intact to class each week in order to continue participation. The women (and one young man) of La Amancia have already decided that they are going to further specialize based on skill set (shirts, pants, togas, etc.) and split the profits equally. All participants seem excited at the prospect of making clothes for themselves and families so that they save money and don't have to travel to stores in the city. Nearly all cited "to help my family" as a primary reason for wanting to learn how to sew, while some added that they'd "always wanted to" but "didn't have the means" and they want to "*aprovechar*" (to make the most of) the free classes now being offered through Projects for Peace funding. Since I presented myself as a student volunteer and did not mention to the sewing students that I had any connection with these funds, I feel that I was getting their sincere appraisal of the project so far: it is overwhelmingly positive and appreciative.

IMPLICATIONS

I maintain wholeheartedly, as I wrote in the proposal, that economic stability promotes the stability of the family, which is vital to peace in any country. However, I have learned a great deal more now. I have seen the incredible transformative power of earning an income with dignity. The dynamism of learning something new has been a breath of fresh air in a place where, despite a tremendously impressive effort by community members and the local NGO to "*salir adelante*" (to get ahead) through projects and workshops, the daily grind of survival occupies every waking hour. The boredom and desperation of unemployment, combined with the constant pressure of feeding oneself and one's family and (for the majority) surviving as a woman in a place full of sexual violence, is wearing indeed.

The leadership of women, in a country where the norm is to keep women at home and in their place, was quite refreshing. I was also pleasantly surprised by the presence of two male participants. To watch all the participants grow in their skills, confidence, and as a group has been exceedingly rewarding, and I look forward to maintaining these contacts and visiting again.

Even as the participants laughed and sang as they sewed and embroidered, the undercurrent of their work was grave indeed. For example, Georgina walks an hour and takes a bus for two more hours each way to get to class in San Ramon, then sews from 9am to 3pm and returns. One day her young son was in the hospital with a tumor, which she mentioned almost casually to me as we chatted and sewed. She left him there with her sister and came to class because she "didn't want to miss an opportunity" - an opportunity to help her son. For her, the potential income that would come from sewing would, in the long term, help her son more than her physical presence at that time, should he survive (thankfully, he did). Similarly, Eda travels from El Porvenir by foot because, with 9 kids between the ages of 3 and 21, she can't afford the 50-cent bus fare. She walks four hours each way.

These women awed and humbled me as I stumbled around with the needle and thread. I came to the project with no knowledge of sewing. For me, my sewing ineptness didn't matter, because it wasn't my livelihood. For the beneficiaries, the opportunity to sew has meant hope and stability, and enhanced the lives of their entire families. Thank you for providing them with that opportunity.