

Chiapas Indigenous Women's Fair Trade Weaving Cooperatives

~the struggle for women's empowerment and Indigenous autonomy~

By Caitlyn Vernon

On February 8th, 2005, Pascuala Patishtan and Merit Ichin spoke about the work of the Indigenous women's fair trade weaving cooperative Jolom Mayaetik and the non-governmental organization (NGO) K'in al Antzetik in their struggle for dignity, autonomy and survival in Chiapas, Mexico. The speakers were co-hosted by CERLAC, Women's Studies, the Business and Society Program, the Division of Social Science and the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York.

Introducing the NGO K'in al Antzetik, Merit Ichin explained that the name of the NGO means "Land of Women." Her organization works with women of the weaving cooperative Jolom Mayaetik to articulate their project priorities and to recognize the knowledge they have. The NGO then supports these projects as a means to strengthening communities. The cooperative of women weavers represents an alternative economic model that confronts the singular economic model imposed on Chiapas.

The name of the cooperative Jolom Mayaetik means "Mayan weavers." Pascuala Patishtan, Secretary of the cooperative, began her presentation by describing the socio-economic and geographical context in which the women work. Many of the cooperative's members live in

remote communities in the mountains, accessible only by foot. Women have identified weaving, a traditional part of their culture, as a means to support their families. Seeing that if each woman sells her products individually in the market, they are all competing with one another and no one receives a good price, in 1984 women came together to form the cooperative Jolom Mayaetik. Currently the cooperative has 250 members – all women – from many different communities and municipalities of Chiapas. Many of the members of the cooperative today are the daughters and granddaughters of the women who founded it, and who continue to actively participate in the coop. With the cooperative, Patishtan says, the women receive a better price, but it is still difficult to get a fair price.

Patishtan described the laborious process of working with wool. The women raise sheep and shear the wool twice a year. The wool is hand spun, and coloured with natural dyes. The weaving itself is time consuming – she pointed out that it would take a month on a big backstrap loom to make a skirt like the one she was wearing.

She described how the symbols used in the weaving have been inherited from the women's ancestors; the specific patterns identify the

community of origin for each item. With the assistance of a French designer new product designs are created for the European market, but the traditional symbols remain unchanged.

Indigenous women educate and empower themselves through their participation in the women's cooperative Jolom Mayaetik. Their work raises women's political awareness, and creates alternatives to gender and economic subordination. In describing the structure and function of the cooperative, Patishtan emphasized that the General Assembly is the most important organizing body. It is there that the women speak and make decisions, and that an executive council (President, Secretary and Treasurer) is elected from the members to represent the cooperative. As well as assisting with the marketing of products, the cooperative offers workshops in accounting, administration, history, and women's rights. The NGO K'in al Antzetik assists them with these workshops, and is building a training centre that has space for the cooperative. Through participation in the cooperative the women learn their rights. They want the government to take them into account as indigenous people, and their hope is that the cooperative will continue to benefit their children.

Women's work in this weaving cooperative has been instrumental in maintaining the autonomy of Indigenous communities in Chiapas, providing an alternative source of income for communities whose livelihoods continue to be threatened by macro-economic development plans such as the Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), trade agreements such as NAFTA, and persistent low-intensity warfare.

Questions from the audience prompted a lively and wide-ranging discussion, beginning with questions of the cooperative's structure. The process of electing the representatives to the executive council respects the organizational forms traditional to the communities. Women are asked if they would be willing to take on a *cargo*, a position in the cooperative. The women are given time to make their decision; it is expected to be a slow process. If they choose to accept, they enter 6 months of accounting and administration workshops in preparation for the position. A General Assembly is held to make the transition between representatives. It can be a difficult transition for the women who join the executive council, not just due to the responsibility of the work but because for the duration of their *cargo* they are required to leave their communities, where they speak their own languages, and live in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas. The administrative positions last two years, after which they are passed on so that as many women as possible can benefit from learning the skills.

When women are interested in joining the cooperative, the executive council explains to them the work of the coop as well as both the benefits and the obligations that the members have. The obligations

include attending meetings, making decisions collectively, the responsibility of the *cargos*, and the willingness to sell products of all the members, not just their own. The applicants then are given time to discuss amongst themselves, before deciding whether or not to join. Jolom Mayaetik makes explicit to new members that the work of the coop is not just economic, but is political in nature. Through the workshop content and the organizational structure, Jolom Mayaetik both expects and offers more than economic opportunities and obligations to its members. If women prefer to be involved in a cooperative that is strictly economic and does not have the same political commitment to women's rights, there are several others in the region.

It was asked how the men have responded, and if involvement in the cooperative has affected social relationships. In some of their workshops the women try to reach out to the men. For example in workshops on domestic violence, identified as a problem by the women, both men and women were invited to attend. As well they have held workshops on *Usos y Costumbres*, the traditional forms of community governance and organization. By challenging the established structures in this way, their goal is to keep the aspects of *Usos y Costumbres* that they like, such as the customs of dress, language, and festivals, but change the practice that parents decide who their daughters marry, and the practice that women can't go to the city to sell their products. In some cases roles are seen to be changing; men are beginning to look after children while the women go to meetings.

One of the objectives of the NGO is that the women who come out of the

cooperative continue to advise and work with other women's groups. Two of the women working in the NGO K'in al Antzetik were previous representatives of the cooperative. Ichin pointed out that the process of women coming together with their products in the cooperative opens up many possibilities. The economic base is very important, but it is also a political process. With more information, when the women know they have rights, then they can defend their rights. They want not just to subsist, but to live, like human beings.

To learn more or to contact the women, write (in English or Spanish) to jolom@prodigy.net.mx or to kinal@laneta.apc.org.



The CERLAC Bulletin

is a publication series of the Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean at York University. The series disseminates, in concise format, the principal content of informational presentations hosted by the Centre.

Contact CERLAC

Email: cerlac@yorku.ca

Webpage:

<http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/>