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THE PROMISE OF COOPERATIVES FALLS SHORT FOR IMMIGRANT WOMEN

By Lisa Thomson

The sound of humming sewing machines fills the dim, but spacious basement of the United Methodist Church in Jamaica, Queens. On a tree-lined street down the road from a high school, Nivedita Chandrappa sits at a table, surrounded by fabric, spools of thread of assorted colors and women learning to sew.

A sewing instructor leans over the table, surrounded by three other women, and shows them how to cut a pattern. With scraps of fabric surrounding her feet, another woman asks the teacher to inspect a seam she’s just finished sewing.

The women meet there under the guidance of Wishwas, a non profit that focuses on providing seamstress training and economic empowerment to immigrant women.

Originally from Bangalore, the nonprofit’s executive director, Chandrappa knows what it’s like to move to New York from overseas, to feel isolated and not have a network.

Chandrappa moved to the U.S. in 1996 to join her husband. Although she held a degree in journalism and had worked for several years in India, she soon found herself staying at home to care for her two children in the U.S.

“I just felt like my life was falling behind because I hadn’t done anything for myself of my career.”

Now, she’s looking to the cooperative model to bolster economic opportunities for other immigrant women, but with no experience developing a cooperative and difficulty accessing help, she says she’s finding the process confusing.

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Chadrappa and an increasing number of other women in New York are looking to for solutions is the worker cooperative movement.

A worker cooperative is a special type of business where the workers are also the owners, which allows them to share in running the day to day of the business as well as the profits.
They are becoming popular way for immigrant women to gain economic independence and become entrepreneurs. As the city invests an increasing amount of money to support this initiative, the services available are scattered and disjointed, are often run by people who are new to cooperative development, while the promise of stable employment and higher wages go unmet.

Since Fiscal Year 2015, the New York City Council has invested an increasing amount of money in the city’s Worker Cooperative Business Development Initiative. In the initiative’s first year the budget was $1.2 million dollars but has since doubled to $2.1 million.

As of May 2015, there were 455 cooperative members in the city. Ninety-nine percent of whom are women and non-white, according to a report from March by researcher Dr. Maliha Safri.

But the group that’s driving the movement in New York is immigrant women, according to cooperative researcher Sanjay Pinto.

Pinto says the increased has followed the 2008 financial crisis because immigrant women in vulnerable jobs like domestic and childcare work are looking for more stability and higher wages, two of the main draws of the cooperative structure and are left out of traditional systems.
Already stretched thin with time and money, Chadrappa is trying to form a cooperative on her own, and without any guidance. But in the meantime, some of the women who have been attending the sewing class are operating as an informal cooperative under her guidance until she can find the help formalize and incorporate a legal cooperative.

Shammi Akhter Popy is one of those women attends the sewing classes and who is part of the cooperative. Wearing bright pink lipstick that matches her scarf and top, she’s originally from Bangladesh, she moved the U.S. eight years ago and has been the primary caregiver in her family. She says she started coming to Wishwas in the summer so she could learn to sew so that when her children get a bit older she’ll have some skills to get work. She’s hoping Wishwas will help her to gain some economic independence.

Popy, who lives in Queens, picks up the bag she just finished sewing, which was commissioned by a local designer, and said “I made this one” with a laugh and a smile.
(Sewing instructor Danielle Tertulien, originally from Haiti, inspects a seam sewn by Shammi Akhter Popy Photo by Lisa Thomson)
(Shammi Akhter Popy holds her first sewing project, which was contracted by a local retailer *Photo by Lisa Thomson*)

(Scraps of fabric surround the feet of the women in the basement of the United Methodist Church in Jamaica, Queens *Photo by Lisa Thomson*)

At a national level, New York City is home to one-tenth of all cooperatives in the country with most of them being concentrated in Brooklyn, according to a March 2016 report written by Sanjay Pinto entitled “Ours to Share.”
While coops that have been formally incorporated have strict governance, contracting and payment rules, as an informal coop Wishwas doesn’t yet have these elements.

In the past, Chadrappa has given the women advice on how to negotiate contracts, but now she says, “we let them negotiate with buyers themselves.” “Also buyers are happy that way because they know money goes directly to women,” she continued.

When the women receive a contract Chadrappa helps them to negotiate it. When it comes to payment, rather than a check being made out to a formal cooperative, the check is addressed to one of the women who worked on the contract, who then distributes it to the other women. The distribution is based on the honor-system.

Chadrappa says it’s important that one of the women is responsible for the money, because if the nonprofit were to distribute the funds “they suspect were taking percentage out of it.”

This process differs from formal cooperatives, which deposit any revenue from contracts or work into a special business account and then distribute the money as paychecks twice a month.
She also says the money is also distributed according to skill level, rather than a flat rate for each woman - so those who are more highly skilled receive a bigger cut, while those who are not as skilled receive less. With most worker cooperatives, members receive the same flat-rate for their work.

Chadrappa says she’s reached out to a number of organizations in the city, but that her requests for information have gone unanswered or that she hasn’t been able to find help due to her organization’s specific language needs. She says the Bangladeshi community is isolated, and that she thinks the language barrier might be an issue because while many of the women can write in English, they’re much more comfortable speaking in Bengali.

Included in this year’s city council budget was an increase allocation of funds to the worker’s cooperative initiative, nearly doubling its commitment from the previous year.

But along with an increased budget comes less clarity over the expected outcomes of the new year of funding. While the number of jobs and cooperatives expected to be created each year were clearly stated in the first year of the initiative, this has not been the case in subsequent years.

### Cooperative Metrics: Actual vs. Target

![Cooperative Metrics Chart](image)

Source: [NYCWCI Final Report, 2015](#)
Setting up a worker cooperative can be a slow and winding process. Cooperative development is being guided by community organizations around the city who themselves may have little or no experience launching a cooperative.

Three years ago, Claudia Larios, gave her name and number to a worker cooperative in Brooklyn and never heard from them.

But last March, she heard about a new child care worker cooperative being developed by the Carroll Gardens Association from a friend and decided to get involved as a founding member.

Now, one Saturday each month she takes to the time to head to the Carroll Gardens Association for a monthly development meeting with her cooperative. Where they have been planning the structure of their cooperative and defining its mission ahead of its launch next year.

Larios moved to the US fourteen years ago and lives here with her husband and three children. Formerly a child care provider, Larios now works as a housecleaner two days a week, but says although she's paid above minimum wage at $12 an hour, it's not enough. She says she thinks the cooperative will be a chance for her to have more of a say in work and that she'll have a better income and more stability.

Claudia Larios is one of 15 women who have been working with the CGA since the beginning of the year.

The cooperative is being developed by Ben Fuller-Googins, the program and planning director of the Carroll Gardens Association. He said that this is his first cooperative, and that when he went into cooperative development after receiving funding through the city’s initiative, he didn't feel equipped with the skills to be leading development, and that even today there’s still a lot of and certainty.

Fuller-Googins says that they arrived at the idea of starting a domestic workers cooperative after just looking around the neighborhood and noticing there were a number of childcare workers on the streets, and that as a group of workers who are often working alone they might be interested in banding together.

"We literally went into parks and out on the street and said “hello I'm Ben from the CGA we're an affordable housing and economic development group.” They then started
holding open houses to introduce local domestic workers to their organization, and have since been holding monthly meetings with just over a dozen women who are work to start a cooperative.

On a recent Saturday afternoon a Larios and 14 other women gathered at the CGA where a lawyer from the Urban Justice Center, a nonprofit legal services organization, was taking them through the different ways they can incorporate their cooperative as well as the different organizational structures they can decide to use.

As the women sat together over a potluck meal of chicken, rice and chips they were surrounded by posters. One poster outlines group practices such as “one person speaks at a time” and “lift each other up” while another has “education is very important, but translations are very time consuming.”

(A group of women meet to discuss how they will incorporate their cooperative at the Carroll Gardens Association, where they meet once a month. Photo by Lisa Thomson)

As a multi-lingual cooperative with women from 12 different countries, according to Fuller-Googins, the group carries out all of their meetings in English and Spanish.

How the business is incorporated is an aspect of worker cooperatives that can most benefit immigrant women who may be undocumented, according to Rebecca Lurie.
Lurie is the program director and founder of the Community and Worker Ownership Project at the City University of New York, which is devoted to providing training, research and support for the cooperative worker initiative.

If a cooperative is incorporated as an Limited Liability Corporation (LLC) rather than other forms such as a Cooperative corporation, C corporation or general partnership, then individuals who are not U.S. citizens or permanent residents can be owners.

For a number of the women working with the Carroll Gardens Association, this is particularly valuable because it would allow them to be worker-owners and so work legally.

Fuller-Googins says he doesn’t have exact figures but that there are definitely members of the cooperative he’s working with who are undocumented.

When it came to deciding how to structure how the cooperative’s voting practices, some of the women raised concerns over giving too much vote power to prospective members. Prospective members gain voting right during a probationary period so that they are considered owner-workers rather than employees, which would then entitle them to employee labor rights, something the cooperative would like to avoid.

But the discussion ran over the allotted time for the meeting, leaving the matter unresolved until it can be picked up again at the group’s meeting, but that won’t be for another month.

On working on the cooperative nine months Larios says, “it’s a process.”

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The women behind the Maharalika cooperative are on the other side of the cooperative development process. They launched their office cleaning business back in January 2015 after splitting off from a separate cooperative as a result about concerns over transparency. They saw setting up their own cooperative as a chance to set their own terms.

They held a recent meeting in the communal rec room of one member’s apartment in Williamsburg - where she lives with her adult daughter. But before meeting to discuss business, they first ate dinner together upstairs in the apartment — something they do often.
With notebooks and documents strewn across the table, in the middle sat a birthday cake for one of the women.

Wearing matching white polos with pink trim and their cooperative’s flower-logo on the breast. In Taglog, Maharalika means power while their flower represents unity, which they say is how they feel when wearing their shirts.

Speaking in Tagalog with occasional English sprinkled in, six of the seven cooperative owners met to discuss the upcoming visit of the president of the Philippines. They talked about and how they would be going to the Phillipine Consulate General on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan to showcase their cooperative.

With strong family connections back home in the Philippines, they see the event as an opportunity to promote their business and show off what they, as Filipino women, have accomplished together in the U.S.

With seven members and four clients, the women take pride in what they’ve accomplished so far. Before their meeting, they hang up their cooperative’s banner in a corner of the room and throughout one member extends her selfie stick to take photos
to share on the group’s Facebook page, which they actively use to promote their work.

(Two members of the Maharalika cleaning cooperative hang a sign before their meeting
Photo by Lisa Thomson)
But more than a year after launching are still working other jobs and remain reliant on
the resources of their cooperative developer for their client base, and for basic business
necessities.

For the women of Maharalika they founded the co-op for the same reasons that are
common among immigrant women. These are primarily improved wages and job
security, according to Stephanie Guico, who wrote the 2015 summary of the first year of
the city’s cooperative initiative.

Each of the women are from the Philippines and have lived in the US New York for
between three and 30 years, and all but two of them work either part-time or full time in
different jobs outside of the coop.

“This is our extension job”, said Emma Ceraphine who works full time as a child care
provider but wants the cooperative to be her primary employment. Ceraphine’s
immediate family, including her son, live in the Philippines. While he has a sister and a cousin in the U.S. the reason she’s here is to work.

“you know no matter what we try our best to work hard to support our family back home,” she said.

One of the women works as a full-time office clerk in the accounting department of a car dealership in Harlem, three as cleaners—one part time and two full-time—and one more as a child care worker.

At the moment, the cooperative only has four clients, all of whom they found through their organization that helped them launch, the Center for Family Life. For the women, this means there’s only enough work for two of the women to have full time employment through the cooperative, but they all still pay dues each month even if they’re not working.

While the cooperative workers have an hourly take-home wage that they say is above market rate of $15/hr, Llanto says her monthly wages come out to approximately $1500, which is a bit more than she made in her previous job.

Although the ability to set her own hours is a draw of the cooperative model, since their business focuses on cleaning offices, it means her hours are actually determined by when the office closes and she’s able to go in and work, meaning often times she’ll find herself out late on transit after she’s finished her after-hours shifts.

The CFL is the cooperative developer in the city that has guided Maharalika through the process of setting up their business and launching. They’ve also been a main source of clients for them. While the CFL doesn’t contract with the cooperative it has been the main source of recommendation for clients.

In addition to introducing clients to the cooperative, the CFL also helps the women by providing them with some of the cleaning supplies they use to operate their business.

While the cooperative still relies on support and has yet to get enough clients so all the women can start working, it has managed to do so without taking on financial risk.

For Maharalika, taking out bank loans was something they wanted to avoid.
“No,” said Ceraphines when asked whether they’d considered a bank loan to start their cooperative.

“We’re so scared,” she added.

In order to avoid taking out a loan, the women instead started an online fundraiser, through which they were able to raise around $3000 from their friends and family.

Although the women might not yet have reliable income and employment from their cooperative, they have established strong connections with each other. At the end of their meeting the women took out the selfie stick and filmed themselves as they sang happy birthday to Guadalupe Omaguing.

(At the end of their meeting, the women light a candle and sing happy birthday to cooperative member, Guadalupe Omaguing. Photo by Lisa Thomson)