CHAPTER 5
5.1 ANALYSIS OF THE BILBAO CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY (BCS)

Anyone moved by questions regarding social change through collective action must be interested in the dynamics between the practitioner, her organization and her social environment. Change will ultimately depend on the personal ability to cope with uncertainty and conflict. That is what will be analyzed here. These appear in connection with definite stages in the process of change.

AREA 1. INTERFACE BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE ORGANIZATION

A very important factor for collective synergy in the Bilbao Co-operative Society is the women's common background, a background that is part of their present. These are past experiences which have not been overcome and which act on the women's self-perceptions. Some got rid of them by getting involved in activities and groups like this co-operative. Some others tried to forget but they have not been able to owing to a sort of belief that they have been dogged by ill-luck in life. This keeps on eating at the self-esteem of the women. They just want to live in peace, hiding their pasts, their ideas and beliefs. They adjust their behaviour to the social situation as much as they can but they also behave in ways consistent with attitudes born of
those experiences. They feel afraid of being taken advantage of. Most of their understanding of the world (e.g., other people, situations) is filtered through their understanding of the self (as a low-self) and past experiences. The co-operative is the new environment where blocking experiences can be transformed into fostering ones.

Maltreatment is one of the key words. At the psychological level they have suffered aggression, humiliation through behavior that produces low self-esteem. Bad words and sentences like "You are nothing compared to me", "You cannot do anything other than stay at home and cooking". They reported rape within marriage, at the physical level deliberate actions which caused physical or mental harm: injuries, hematoma, fractures. These are some examples. The period of harassment varies from one year to five among the interviewed women. One woman reported: "I have had lots, lots of experiences as like hundreds of women, hundreds of women who do not share or tell anything to anyone because they feel ashamed or because they have lost their capacity to struggle (...) Then one day you realize that you are sinking and getting drawn down. This is the moment when you have to choose between dying and getting out of that situation". She went several times to the hospital due to the injuries caused by her husband's beatings. "I was going literally mad. That was real madness. One day I caught myself planning how to get rid of him. This frightened me a lot, so much that I felt absolutely down, depressed and with a feeling of being a hopeless woman. I had no
sense of my existence, I had no sense of my ‘self as a person’. Then she decided for the fourth time to look for a lawyer but making sure that this time it would be a woman. "The woman lawyer asked me whether he had beaten me. I answered that he had not. She insisted, telling me that all of them have more or less the same pattern of behaviour and that she could immediately make out. She asked me again whether he had beaten me. I started crying. Coming across that woman was wonderful".

Women who reported such experiences suffered important changes in their personalities. They had to adapt themselves to their husbands to avoid new situations of violence. They made tremendous efforts to understand the causes of that violence hoping that one day the situation would change. They avoided speaking with others about their problems to keep that image of a ‘good couple’. This sense of privacy and ‘image’ keeps women socially isolated in the company of unarticulated anxieties.

They bore the situation thinking of their children. Later on, thinking of their children they made up their minds, and facing all kinds of opposition they decided to live separately and finally to divorce. Their emotional reactions were depression, fear, insecurity, a sense of powerlessness, shame, guilt and a deep sense of worthlessness which remains for years affecting their self-esteem, initiative and creativity.
One woman reports "It has taken me years to realize that I had more capacities than my ex-husband. I have been living for years and years feeling helpless. I never thought that I had rights. It is as if I had been always in a ‘window-shop’ where you have to be chosen because you have never the right to choose".

After divorce they have been living by themselves with their children and financially were dependent on their parents - only one of them received a pension from the husband. The main reason for this was lack of employment opportunities due to the lack of qualifications, problems of alcoholism or the structural unemployment that the Basque country has been undergoing since 1980. Economic and emotional dependence, and lack of institutional support (the judiciary, police) were some of these women's obstacles. Most of them were housewives without economic means of their own. Generally, they belong to a low class though in one or two cases they could be classified as low-middle class. With or without painful experiences in the background, what is common to all of them is the lack of employment opportunities. Unqualified women have no means of survival in a market economy where discrimination on the basis of sex is still a practice.

As one woman said: "The co-operative helped me to get out of the unstructured job. It was the beginning of getting out of that personal situation through increasing my ability to acquire. I became
independent. I bought a flat and I stopped listening to my mother all the time. She was part of my frustration. I could educate my children as I wanted to. I became the Queen of that little place of my own. ... Those little things helped me. To have money on my own. To give and buy things for my daughters. To be able to pay for the flat and manage it. No one could tell me anything and I even had the authority to tell my husband "We will see in the court if you do not commit yourself to your daughters. Otherwise do not take them with you (for a weekend) and leave them with me" It is when you start feeling worthwhile. I fell in love with the co-operative. I worked on Sundays, Mondays... day and night. People used to tell me: How do you manage? My self-esteem went up... You realize that you are a woman that does things and on top of that you do it well. (...) We were the pioneers and participants of a project that was ours". Those women involved in the co-operative put their best efforts into doing what they value. The work itself has its inherent value and allows the women to realize and direct their energy and imagination into the work.

Related to what has been said above, women think that there is a special 'closeness' among them in this co-operative because most of them have something in common. That commonality is, as one said, "the place we come from: home. And an experience which is not a very pleasant one". Personal experiences of subjection and the need for emotional support have an appeal at the gut level. They somehow
click and this is what gives them a sense of collective identity. Collective identity leads to greater sense of belongingness, personal interaction, a deeper understanding and intensification of team spirit. As Bennis states, "this sets the stage for a proactive culture, which forms the essential precondition for the development of a more interactive and creative culture...". This identity generates a deeper rapport, a kind of bonding among the women, and a genuine feeling of mutual trust and support.

Women involved in the co-operative believe they are in the BCS because the co-operative philosophy corresponds to the style of relationship between their experiences and those of the women who surround them. The co-operative was born as a response to multiple women’s economic and emotional needs in order to face them collectively. This is the fundamental condition for the co-operative to succeed and the motor of the women’s motivation. "This enterprise has always been very, very solidary and supporting. If you have a difficult situation, a hard situation which limits you in performing your work, you can go to the co-operative and explain it to them. Any kind of conflict or problem, whether it is financial or whatever, you go and tell them that you are living in this situation, that you need their help, their understanding and their acceptance of your situation. There is always a solution. They always support you and strengthen you".
There is a very high awareness among those who actively participate in the social organs that the co-operative is just an instrument for solving women's problems, that the co-operative is not operational by itself but by the persons that form it. The people are ultimately the authors of the changes. "The people are the capital of the co-operative". In spite of the multiple difficulties and risks that this option carries with it, the only thing that the women cannot afford is being passive. "Social passivity" is something which specially alienates women. The co-operative gives the opportunity to women to be 'socially active' by subordinating organizational elements to their human development. Thus, they opt for this concrete type of organization because they believe that this form of action offers greater opportunities to foster their development with respect to the values of freedom, solidarity, participation, equality and humanization. Their identification with common objectives and efforts is what gives them strength and enthusiasm in the common adventure. They believe that personal commitment is a process through which women who have been touched by a personal experience or a problem awaken and feel motivated to do something for themselves and for women in similar circumstances.

The most assertive women were (i) those who were not victims of gender oppression in their lives. They generally felt accepted and loved. (ii) those women who in spite of having been victims of gender oppression and discrimination have undergone vital personal
changes. Non-formal education and therapy have been the means to personal growth. An example:

Que. To what extent do you know yourself?
Ans. I think quite a lot.
Que. And how have you came to know yourself so much?
Ans. I have done a lot of work on myself which I think is very important. I am still on it. I think I know myself. I feel each and every negative or positive feeling. Simply I feel, that is all, without breaking my head; when you feel you know in what situation you find yourself, you know when you feel jealousy, when you do not care about things, you know whether you are really glad if everything goes all right with a particular person. To that extent I know and accept myself.

Que. Why are you so wise?
Ans. The circumstances of life. I also think that I have always been a deep person. I have always been aware of having something profound in me. The problem is that you never stop and see what it is. Life is very hard, because it is hard. But it is wonderful to be, it is wonderful to see the sky. When you feel just the opposite then you have to repeat to yourself everyday that being here is a gift. When we feel low our mind punishes us and tries to do with us what our mind wants to. You have to stop it and look at things from another perspective (...) Maite (the psychologist) has been for me a gift from heaven.
She has been a very important person in my life. She has helped me a lot. She has been the one who has guided me. (...) I still have days when I feel low and anxious, but it does not matter. I know it will go away" (...) Now I know that I am functioning better. I live with an inner security, with the feeling of fearlessness. You function from another perspective. You are your 'self'. You are not any more afraid of what may came next. It is difficult but I am trying (...)

Que. Do you think the women of the co-operative would appreciate this kind of formation?

Ans. I do not think so. When you tell people about your 'self', that there is something within you that is 'you' and that it can give you the answer to so many questions.

Que. But people are just behind those things!

Ans. People would like it but it is difficult. Perhaps it is ignorance. Many of them will think that all these things are nonsense".

On the other hand there is a growing tendency to increase a cognitive and affective awareness of physical and emotional functioning as a means of improving the whole person in the co-operative. Physical and mental care have been promoted by the co-operative, organizing courses on stress and offering sessions of massage also as a way of avoiding physical unfitness that may have repercussions on the work. The women are highly aware that exercise provides the necessary resistance and well being required by the body and mind. Eventually,
they attend different courses and sessions focused upon fitness training to modify bodily functions and to enhance awareness of self-well-being. Sporting activities help them to relish their physical and mental strength and endurance. It is also a way of being physically closer to other people. A woman said, "Earlier I used to feel guilty for going just for a swim to the swimming pool. I thought I could be giving this time to my children or doing anything else. Now I try to go three days a week for swimming and two days for massage. Doing that I feel mentally and physically more relaxed and with strength to continue working and facing the problems of life. By the way, I do not feel guilty anymore. Now I think it is also my right and I make others understand and respect it.... this has happened to me after joining the co-operative". However, the formation provided to these women by the BCS lacks a gender based analysis. Women's personal problems like stress, depression or emotional instability are not analyzed from a gender perspective. They tackle the problem at the level of symptoms rather than at the level of causes. Those women who are specially assertive or identified with feminist ideas are being misunderstood by women and men creating in them a sense of being a 'black sheep'. They are the ones who suffer stronger opposition specially from the few men in the co-operative.

Some women's perceptions of their selves are related to physical strength. They perceive themselves as weak when they compare themselves with the stereotype of a man who is powerful because of
his physical strength. There is a tendency to mix the adjective ‘strong’ (physically) with ‘powerful’. “Men are physically stronger. They can do things that we cannot. There are certain services where a man would be required because the beneficiary in bed can be a very heavy person to move”. Some women still attach physical strength to the idea of superiority. My answer to that was the following question: Then, how superior is an elephant to a man?

One of the exercises was to enumerate or describe women’s qualities. I found three categories of women: a) Those women who denied having qualities (70%). b) Those who see qualities in themselves but find it difficult to speak about them (25%). c) Those who can see and speak about them (5%). The reaction of the majority was to laugh. A laughter accompanied by sentences like "I do not know" "I have never thought of it" "Me?, qualities?". Most of them felt embarrassed with this question.

Women have not developed the skill to perceive themselves without searching for weakness, drawbacks. There are very demanding on themselves. They are never perfect. There is always something which shadows their rest, an obsessive guilt. It seems that it is a very general belief that seeing good in ourselves is an act of arrogance. Instead, the capacity to pin pointing the so-called ‘defects’ is so developed that their self-concept is only a collection of these defects. They are never ‘good’ enough. It is easier to play down themselves than to explain
what they are like. The problem is that they do not coincide with what they see.

The general tendency among them is to see themselves as patient, understanding and good listeners which coincides with the stereotype society has about women. Most of the them are not aware of having internalized from their environment the concept of a ‘good’ woman as one who understands, cares and serves everybody at large. Women tend to value being sensitive and maintaining good relationships at the cost of their own comfort and rights. This is the stereotype of women accepted in society and the kind of woman that will not create problems. The guilt of not being always what they think they should be, cripples the women’s growth and development.

Being rebellious is considered a weakness. But all of them agree on the fact that when they rebel or get annoyed it is because they have reached the end of their patience. Being patient implies being quiet, submissive, tolerant, non-assertive.

The fact that the organization and society evaluates these qualities positively is not something wrong. The problem lies in the fact that the traditional and dominant gender stereotype is being reinforced and reproduced, on the one hand, by the type of social service they are engaged in and, on the other, by the absence of activities at the organizational level in which women could develop other
supplementary qualities like assertiveness, critical intelligence and an attitude of struggle. The women are not aware of the fact that they are 'living stereotypes' which hinder their right to be fully living persons beyond the limits imposed by those categories. For instance, to say 'no' is a difficult task for them. Let us take an example:

Que. Were you afraid of coming to the interview?
Ans. I was afraid of your judgements.

Que. And have you felt compelled to answer my questions?
Ans. Somehow yes. I have answered every question and without refusing any time. After all I still belong to that kind of education and culture that have been imposed on me the belief that we must be submissive and pleasant to others always, the belief that I should not be rebellious.

Que. You have never thought of your right to tell me, "I do not want to answer that question?"
Ans. It has never occurred to me.

Que. Because the one who is in front of you is a kind of God that...
Ans. I have to answer and serve.

Another case:
"I had gone to a private high school of sisters where I was taught always to say 'yes'. I had tremendous difficulties in saying no and I think it is due to this kind of education. I was told all the time what to do and what not to do. You have to obey and respect your parents.
You leave the school at the age of 18 and nowadays (She is 38) my parents do not allow me to breathe. I have only recently decided to say no and to live my life because after all it is mine... Now I keep telling my mother that I want to be myself... I try to be loyal to myself but it is so difficult because always they try to manipulate me". How difficult it is to say no without feeling guilty!"

This concept of a 'good' woman internalized by these women forms also part of the image of a 'good' organization that BCS tries to promote. We have here a situation in which the personal stereotype is being reinforced by the willingness of the organization to sell itself with this image. Challenging this image at a personal level would imply undermining the image that the organization is trying to promote in society. Again, society's expectations determine the way the co-operative must appear.

Breaking the idea of 'having culture' or the stereotype of a 'knowledgeable person'. I have found common attitudes in women with very rich learning experiences who have given up the idea of developing their intellect further at the age of 40: "The time is gone" and "I am not capable", or sentences like "I am a village woman who knows only how to clean the house", or "I have no culture" and the habit of saying every now and then "let us see if I can explain myself" which shows the insecurity created by the lack of degrees or formal qualifications. Some of the terms are related to the idea of not having
'culture' which equals to knowing nothing or very little. The stereotype of the knowledgeable person is acting upon them. Knowledge and wisdom are two different but complementary things. A 'qualified person' with a number of degrees is not guarantee to be a 'wise' person. This very idea which I shared with some women made them think about their hidden knowledge and wisdom for the first time.

There are various reasons for having no qualifications:

(i) Many of these women gave up the idea of studies because they were the eldest and had to work so that the youngest brother could study. In the case of being the third sister and having only a younger brother she was forced to study what her two elder sisters had: to be a secretary. The youngest brother studied medicine. "My parents did not encouraged me to proceed with my studies something that they did with their sons".

(ii) They did not see the need for it and they opted for working at an early age. Money was more appealing to them as means of freedom and enjoying life.

The lack of qualification conditions women to the extent that they think they do not know or it is too late to know and understand. The idea of themselves as persons without formal qualifications prevents them from using their intelligence, from formulating new ideas or
acting on them. On the basis of that 'ignorance' they limit their dreams, wishes or aspirations. Their strong belief that "I do not know" programmes their minds and as a self-fulfilling prophecy their initiative, creativity and performance are limited. They stop themselves from giving their opinions, on any of the topics society thinks only 'intellectuals' can comment upon.

But there are leaders breaking the naive belief that knowledge is merely the result of merely studies. Women belonging to the social organs of the co-operative and those who have already worked in them have proved it. One of the characteristics common to all the women is the qualification level. Almost none of them have completed even primary school. Instead, with an appropriate reflection and action born of experience they have intellectually and personally developed qualities so as to manage an enterprise with 400 co-operativists. They are 'good learners' from whatever opportunity is presented to them. Theory and practice as well as life are their sources of knowledge. These women are the great supporters and trainers for those living and working around them. They help other women to discover the trap of believing "I have no culture". They are vivid examples of women who have overcome that mental trap. They consciously train other women by creating perceptual changes in their attitudes and belief systems. They have experienced that anyone at any stage in the cycle of their lives can be reborn.
A continuous formation of the woman as person-worker-entrepreneur is undertaking by the BCS. It has broken with the stereotyped concept that formation is a localized process during a particular period of one's life by bringing in a new concept of the distribution of knowledge throughout the whole life of an individual. At the same time they know the importance of those as instruments of influence, power and social recognition. The one who possesses a degree has more opportunities of getting into political, economic and social areas of influence. No wonder that most of the highest posts in enterprises, institutions, politics, NGOs, co-operatives, etc., are managed by men. This is why power is identified with those posts and with men.

An example of it is the power given by the women themselves to men in the co-operative revealing a deep-rooted assumption about males: a man, by the mere fact of being male, is more capable and more acceptable than women in society and at the institutional or organizational level. A woman stated: "A man gives security mainly to the older women of the co-operative. It is also a question of the image which needs to be projected in society. There is still a psychological dependency on the presence of a man. The funny thing is that there are women more qualified to do what he is doing!".
Chapter 5. A Women's Experience on Collective Action

Connected with the tendency described above, women tend to become over-considerate towards the few (three) men in the organization. Although, the symbol '@' is used to refer to both genders in the written documents, they use a spoken language which is highly male biased. The reason is that "we do not want to offend them". More than four hundred women have to be sensitive to three men. The opposite does not seem to appear to them as important.

The feelings of most of the women about leadership are those of rejection. This study has been able to provide a common understanding of what leadership ultimately means to them. A charismatic leader is understood as the one who manipulates masses and masses follow him/her blindly losing touch with reality. The lesson which can be learnt is that there exists an extremely cautious opinion about what kind of a person in an organization will be considered powerful, efficient and even a charismatic leader. The presence of leaders implies that there exist inequalities in the influence of members in the co-operative. Leaders as individuals are an attempt to the collectivity. The women constantly try to reconcile the reality between of individual differences with an ideal of collective control. They think that leadership has to be in each and everyone. They prefer the presence of a manager who makes them fulfill their tasks in time because that post is a rotating one. The manager is elected by the collectivity. Her authority is given by the members of the co-operative and can be withdrawn by the people.
Even participative management is preferred as it enhances the power of many vs. the power of one. Hierarchy is almost absent in the co-operative. In spite of being headed by a group of the most strongly committed people, members are always invited and persuaded to take part actively in the management of the co-operative. Equality is a very appreciated value. Leadership appears to be the antithesis of the egalitarian spirit of control and management.

In spite of denying the existence of leadership they recognize unanimously the importance of the manager in the establishment and success of the co-operative. She is a remarkable charismatic leader for whom "the person must be the centre of the co-operative", in her own words. When I asked for her qualities most of them described her as being human. "She is a person and with that I have said everything".

When I first got to know the BCS though a paper about its history and further developments, I was struck by the number of times the word 'person' was mentioned. Later on, I realized in the day to day life of the co-operative that it was a living reality. The style of management and leadership is person oriented. No wonder all feel the co-operative is a 'big family'. These women by their personal style keep those values which though they function as stereotypes are still valid and necessary in the management of the co-operative. This style provides the necessary understanding and support that the women of the co-operative need to strengthen their self-esteem,
confidence and feeling of being 'someone'. The person is at the centre of the co-operative and often beyond managerial considerations. This can be a source of small conflicts at times. For some women the co-operative is 'too human'. Some leaders of the co-operative confess that there are at times incompatible decisions difficult to resolve. The fear of being too human is also present because, after all, the enterprise has to stay in a market which does not understand humanitarian considerations. Still, they maintain that an effective management or leadership has to understand the person as a whole before taking decisions that may erode the capabilities or potential of those who comprise the enterprise: people. Women are considered first persons and then workers. As the manager admits, she finds it difficult to be human and manager simultaneously, "but when I have to choose I always take care of the person first".

The sense of being someone, is provided through the close relationships among all of them including the management. "She is a comrade. I do not consider her as my manager...". "We are treated first as persons, as women and then as workers". The management makes them feel they can make a difference. They are aware of the need to supplement "intuition with reason" says the chair-woman. Empathy and spontaneous understanding of the inner dynamics of the woman who is in front of her is crucial. No woman imagines a man playing the role of the present manager. They know they have found a place in society and they can improve the lives of others.
welcoming women with a sense of making them feel someone. The results of their work are more satisfactory which in turn increases the sense of belongingness and identification with the purpose and direction of the organization. The co-operative is a means for empowering people at the economic, social and psychological level. It is the person who ultimately gains. It is the organization which ultimately provides the dream and the resources. It can be said that person and organization are mutually reinforcing.

AREA 2. INTERFACE BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

A dichotomy between the culture of the organization and the family is quite common. The family structure of power continues to be traditional. The atmosphere at home is the opposite of the co-operative atmosphere. The woman is not in command, and she is at the service of husband, children and sick relatives. She must take a job to sustain the family financially but she continues doing the cooking, cleaning, keeping track of everyone's clothes. The housework continues to be the responsibility of the woman. She is afraid that the family will fall apart if she does not run the house for everyone. Her role as wife and mother is in most cases either the assigned role or a desired acquired role. Still, she feels overburdened and unappreciated. She takes on too much and to top it all feels insecure about being upto the mark. Self-sacrificing becomes a trap.
In one woman's words: "I have the impression that I am being exploited at home. Everyone takes advantage of me as a mother or as a wife. Perhaps because I have not been able to put myself in the place I deserve. I do not know if it is my character, or because of circumstances or because I do not know how to assert myself. They consider me as a donkey that can take everything... if I am so worthwhile why do they not prove it to me? I am looking after everyone. Why does nobody look after me?". She has never expressed her feelings to them. She swallows and hides everything and her own husband and children are not aware of it. She ends up taking leave for personal problems because she is absolutely exhausted and mentally blocked. There is obfuscation with respect to herself. The self is absorbed in past and present situations hindering the actualization of her potential.

This results in a situation of 'coping with' the work demands and with the home situation. The personal lives of women are emotionally too hectic. Family life can be more stressful than working conditions outside the family. They are too busy getting on with life to make time out to take courses or to have any desire for reflection. My experience with a number of women proved this point. They felt overwhelmed by their emotions. Over and over again they came back to their private lives unknown to the rest of the world. Their hearts and minds were full of restlessness, pain, misunderstandings bore in solitude. They were too blocked or
mentally busy with their personal lives to bother about the cooperative, society or themselves. They had no time to think of themselves. I would say that they do not exist for themselves. They talk about their children, about their children's problems, about the husband and his problems but they do not see themselves apart from the people around. For some of them it would be an act of selfishness to think of themselves. For other women to start thinking of themselves was a new experience. Looking back at their lives, looking at their present and thinking of a future for themselves, distinguishing between what they have to do and what they would love to do. But their obligatory work to meet others' needs and problems gets in the way. They are always at the service of others. The conflict between what they would like to do and what they do is obvious in some cases.

This creates a profound anxiety, physical exhaustion and stress. There is no psychological space or energy left to speak of change and challenge stereotypes which will definitely add more tension to their lives. In fact, during the interviews on many occasions I had to forget my 'silly' questions and listen to the emotional turmoil of the women before me.

If the so-called 'good qualities' are not well managed they can be a source of 'exploitation': Let us see an example of one interviewed woman at home:
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Que. Tell me, what are your qualities?
Ans. I think I have no qualities because I am very humble. Perhaps modesty but I don't know, I do not know.
Que. And what are your defects?
Ans. When I get tired of being taken advantage for very, very long, but it has to be a series of long and bad experiences, then my anger comes up. But it has to be after a long experience of being suppressed and used.

The son of this woman was around while I was interviewing her. It suddenly occurred to me to ask him how he perceived his mother. The conversation which took place was very interesting:

Que. What are the qualities of your mother?
Mother Keep quiet!, keep quiet!
Son She always does more that she is supposed to do.
Que. What do you think is the reason for that?
Son She is too generous and doing so much, doing so much... She does not get anything in exchange
Mother Yes but I do it without expecting anything in turn
Son Yes but one also has to think of oneself.
Mother He is very different to me.
Que. See what he is telling you. Don't you think that it is also important what he is telling you?
Mother I never think of myself. Never.
Son  You only think of the other.
Mother Yes, yes, I do. I do.
Que.  What else?
Son  She gets what she is determined to.
Que.  So she is a very persevering person.
Son  Yes, very.
Que.  So your son has to tell me about qualities that you do not want to tell me.
Mother No, I realize now that what he says is true.
Que.  But you are not aware of it?
Mother Me? Not at all.
Que.  Do you think that she values herself?
Son  Not at all.
Que.  How far does she know herself?
Son  Not at all.
Que.  This is amazing.
Mother This is no fare (joking).
Son  She is too unselfish. If she has something to eat she always has something to give to others.
Mother Please ...
Que.  To what extent is that a quality?
Son  It is quality but it is drawback too. It is what I have told you earlier. If you do not take care of yourself first...
Mother  I also think like that but I am happy doing those things, otherwise I would be very selfish.

She believes in peace but deep down what she believes is that it is not good for her to show her anger. Society very conveniently takes advantage of these traits. Her brother disappeared when the father of both fell sick with Alzheimer. He very clearly said that he did not want to know anything about this problem. They had a very good relationships till then. She did not confront him or anything. Her compassion for her father did the rest. She is at times on the point of having a breakdown because she feels she cannot cope with everything. She is over-stressed and still she offered herself to be interviewed. This is a case of a compulsive need to be good, a way of handling the anxiety that loneliness generates and the need to feel loved.

This high level of understanding blocks the women's right to voice their perspective of things. Actually some women, more than expected, do not mind giving in or conforming to what others may say, for the sake of peace. The one in front of her is always first. The women's needs, wishes or dreams have no room in their lives or in the lives of others. The women live up to that expectation otherwise they feel themselves as a personal failure. The repetition of "I am not sure..." "I do not know..." over and over again shows fear of being
judged and fear of making mistakes. Being human also means the right to make mistakes and accept them as part of a learning process.

The women refuse to express themselves "if it implies hurting others". Their habit is to play themselves down in order to appear 'less than...' as a way of avoiding conflict and putting at stake the acceptance and love they have. It is a kind of exchange at the affective level. If they appear to be 'equal to...' or 'more than...' or just what they are, those in front of them will react opposing them as is the case with the most assertive women of the co-operative. Conflict and rejection are followed by self-doubt. Anxiety of identity: (i) "I may not be 'good' enough. I have to be better". They feel compelled to be always better to make sure that they get acceptance and love. At other times being good is a way of avoiding conflict which will end in physical or psychological violence. The right to be themselves is exchanged for so-called 'peace' which psychologically kills them in the long run. (ii) "I have been good but still I do not get any recognition. What should I be like?, Who am I?" They feel confused. They have given up the idea of being 'subjects' in their lives. A sense of powerlessness underlines their daily life. Depression follows. (iii) Those who recognize their capabilities but feel forced to hide them. At the level of intelligence they pretend not to know or understand persons, situations or whatever. An apparently weak woman does not threaten anyone. The woman secure of herself has the constant disadvantage of having to confront those who feel
uncomfortable with her. Men and women react either rejecting or ignoring. Being oneself requires a clear understanding of what is happening to oneself and as well as to those around. This must be supplemented with the necessary energy to face and handle conflict.

The women have a feeling that after all her 'value' is halved by lack of appreciation and recognition. Home is still a sanctuary where traditional values are maintained. But on the whole, this does not pose a great value-conflict. The reason is that in the co-operative gender awareness is not very high and hence the home-stereotype is not challenged. This produces less tension within. One does not see the need to challenge it. Becoming financially more independent is no guarantee of gaining power and status at home. This proves to me that for a more egalitarian relationship the level of gender awareness is important. A good number of women refused to be called feminist. The stereotype of the feminist was operating on them. A feminist is supposed to be anti-men, exactly opposed to their stereotype: they are moderate and understanding though all of them defend women's rights and equality and work for it. The approach or scope for fighting inequality remains, if at all, at the micro level. Notions gender structures cutting across are beyond their understanding.

"Equality has to be fought for at home rather that on the street".
Challenging socio-economic beliefs is one of the main purposes of the co-operative. It creates a number of challenges as an enterprise of the social economy which cannot be bypassed: "Against the belief that the neo-liberal revolution is a valid economic and social project, we believe in a co-operative where power can be distributed through personal involvement". The members believe that without personal commitment and distribution of power the social economy can never exist. In this sense, the presence of these women at an institutional level is remarkable: in the Federation of Co-operatives of the Basque Country, and on a Platform of Social Economy Enterprises and a number of other institutions and organizations, attending conferences and sharing their peculiar experiences is being taken as a valuable example of a challenge to the 'tie' entrepreneurial culture.

A quotation from the paper (...) "It is believed that the technological revolution decreases the value and need of human labour. The technological substitution of human labour is impossible in these women's home-services. Technology can offer support (a mechanical bed, rehabilitation technology) and facilitate a more autonomous life for the people at home. Technology helps diminish the load of the home help at work. But technology cannot offer company, love, listening to the people. Technology cannot provide human joy, enthusiasm to continue living. Technology cannot recover the lost
habits and attitudes that can contribute to a betterment of people's quality of life. Some people believe that the greatest achievement of the neo-liberals has been to destroy any alternative which does not fit into the logic of the free market and to see economic benefit as the only motor of society.

The co-operative is an alternative to private enterprises engaged in social services, which are making profit on account of women-workers whereas the management of these enterprises comprises men. BCS women look at these as sources of exploitation once again. "The managerial cadre benefits at the social and personal cost of the women who work for the enterprise". For the BCS's women, trust in the management is crucial. They demand what is ethical and moral. The ethical behaviour of the co-operative in obtaining and distributing benefits ('Returns' in co-operative language) is strongly connected to the concept of justice and equality that should prevail in society.

The culture of the BCS stands for the value of 'resistance'. The women revolt against feelings of 'hopelessness' and 'powerlessness'. They believe that a society formed by co-operative enterprises will be a more just, democratic, plural and humane society.
While staying in India, I received a letter from the manager of the co-operative. It is worth translating it because it illustrates very clearly their stand vis-a-vis society:

"... tell all the women that we are in sympathy with them. We are aware of the daily struggle so that equality be recognized. Tell them that we also have to conquer here the 50% of vital space; tell them that we call participation revolution and that we constantly tell ourselves that theory is needed but it is not sufficient. Tell the co-operativist women that our co-operative is not a closed world but a centre of social irradiation. We do not live in a conquered world but in a battlefield for social justice and for a more human and just order. (...)". Sharing protagonism and information; sharing power to influence the enterprise, influencing the beneficiaries' situations is part of the BCS's culture. However, the women feel certain decisions seem to escape their control. They get absorbed by the day-to-day management and efficacy. But still, BCS tries to make the enterprise a common project without creating great expectations. At the same time it encourages a shared responsibility for the project. "This collective adventure gives us the opportunity to offer a service to the community; to obtain certain benefits for all; to grow professionally and personally and to influence socially as well". One of their competitive advantages is to hold a common project where personal and professional involvement are a necessity.
All of them agree that nobody is born a co-operativist. They are also aware of the fact that not all the women identify equally with this ideology. An ongoing formation has been required to transform attitudes which later on and gradually are put into practice within the co-operative. To be a co-operativist and to operate as such requires very concrete attitudes of solidarity, participation, professionalism, human involvement, entrepreneurial skills, socio-economic and personal common responsibilities which one acquires also with the experience of being involved in the co-operative as a common project. From the very beginnings of the BCS, the group of thirty five women which took the initiative realized that their cooperative was not an institution that could be improvised. They were very aware that like any other organization, it required certain conditions that make possible the necessary combination of factors that enables the establishment of the enterprise as a common project: "This is the project of a lot of people and that is very beautiful (...) In a private enterprise surely I would be a trouble maker. This project is very important for many people and for more than we think (...) If you do not come to the BCS you do not have chances to relate even with the one who lives beside you. Instead, you come to the cooperative and relate with people and get out of the family circle: your husband, children or mother in law. In the meeting you can complain, speak...etc. There is scope for those who want to take an active part in it".
The intellectual skills acquired through the attendance of courses in the co-operative and outside along with practical experience within and in relating to other people and institutions has enabled the women to develop and implement actions to achieve goals in a patriarchal society. Among the characteristics of cognitive development are skills related to processing ideas, evaluating, synthesizing and predicting, creating ideas, relationships and applications in solving life problems.

There is common agreement among the members of the BCS on the idea that the co-operative is an enterprise. For those who feel that they are more than workers, entrepreneurs gives a sense of pride and recognition in society. "To me it is very important to know that the co-operative is mine, that I have something".

Before these women joined this co-operative they were worked as housemaids, or as house helpers. This type of work is entirely in what may be called the informal sector. Work conditions were non existent. They did no have any social security. All this created in them an image of being exploited, underpaid and without social recognition. To the low image as a woman one had to add also the low image as a worker. The co-operative has made possible a change of image. The fact that these women have an independent salary and social security gives a new dignity, status and independence. Society also responds with more respect to work that has acquired greater
quality, more professionalism, more value-addition, breaking with the stereotype of a ‘house servant’. A new name has been given to the traditional one: house auxiliary. A course of 200 hours offered by professionals and the co-operative has to be completed in order to have access to this degree.

Though they have improved their self-image, the problem is not entirely solved. There seems to be a strong connection between their low self-image and society's appreciation of their work as low. The change of name and a certain degree of professionalisation has not done away with the way in which the women themselves evaluate this kind of work. In short, there is still a reinforcement of their low-self image by the kind of work they are engaged in, mainly in those women with already low self-esteem. As one of their leaders said: "we are responsible for dignifying these activities". Only a healthy self-esteem can dignify them, otherwise what prevails is the other way around.

The organization has also played a positive role by helping these women set a price to the 'qualities' of caring and serving. It is a matter of being professionally understanding and caring. Setting a price forces society to realize that these qualities cannot be taken for granted and extracted.
They are taught to distinguish between their professional and personal lives. The problems of each environment have to be left in that environment, a difficult task that only can be learnt through experience as they confessed. The kind of job undertaken by these women also has a great influence on their lives. There is a dialectical relationship between the personal life of each woman and the nature of the job. Depressions are a common reason for sickness-leaves. As the psychologist said, "It must be recognized that this type of work prompts depression. This kind of work is very stressful. They are constantly with people who are in the last stage of their lives, living situations of deterioration and social isolation. This requires a tremendous psychic effort besides the physical one and the rhythm of work is quite fast if one wants to do it well".

The activities assigned in their job are highly satisfactory and self-realizing for those who do not suffer or can handle psychological and physical stress:

Que. What do you offer to the beneficiaries?
Ans. Life. News from the outside world. The only contact with the external world is you. You offer what each one needs. Some need support, others love. Others need you to tell them your experiences, others need motivation to continue living and managing on their own. Others need the house to be cleaned or personal hygiene. Others need your help to eat". 
The general feeling is that they have found what they wanted to do in life, something good for others. "Now I could not do without this kind of job. It gives me a lot of satisfaction to work with these people".

Women are eager to be themselves even beyond feminist theories which most of the women in the co-operative do not formally share. But in fact they practice what they do not preach: 'positive discrimination' at the time of recruiting workers. "Nowadays everybody speaks of empowering women. So let us do it". They are aware that the socio-economic situation characterized by a structural unemployment affecting specially women, calls for a solution. "A co-operative enterprise is one alternative to the situation that the Basque Country is undergoing at present. The main problem women have to face is the lack of working opportunities". Solidarity with the rest of the women victims of unemployment is one of the values and sources of motivation for the co-operative to maximise its expansion through investment of benefits and creativity.

This is a very controversial topic in the co-operative. That is the reason why the women do not make so much propaganda on their feminist approach. It would create misgivings among institutions managed by men. One of the women said: "There are many established things which I do not like and that are taken as 'good'. In my relationship with other institutions I am aware that the more
valuable person is not there but the person who by any means wants to be there. At times it is difficult to take it easy and I have had confrontations. This has made me suffer always in my life. When you try to be what you have to... this brings you lots of problems. That is why I never had many friends. I am a very independent person". She is a woman who has fought to be herself in every environment in which she moves. She has to face the conflict between negotiating and being herself. Or rather one has to negotiate in order to be oneself. For the good of the co-operative she has to negotiate at the institutional level. There is no other way out. "When men see an assertive woman they get suspicious or frightened".

Another reason for this lack of identification is that it provides a way of denying that they belong to that collectivity of women who feel marginalised. It is a defence mechanism to divert the discomfort produced by the feeling of being "one of them" (one of those discriminated against). The statement "I am free" does not imply that society respects my rights. No one likes to be labelled 'marginal'. When gender awareness grows, women see more clearly their oppression and feel it more keenly. The women's situation is the result of an unjust patriarchal system in which they are not given equal opportunities.
Women are learning and support each other to find a space and time for themselves. Those at the top of the co-operative have developed or recovered confidence, freedom and self-esteem thanks largely to the opportunities and support provided by the co-operative. Social relations with friends and family have undergone changes in terms of freedom and independence. Because of her new work outside the women member has had to distribute her domestic work among the various members of her family, even if it is as ‘mere helpers’.

One drawback resulting from the present situation of the women is the lack of awareness and commitment of the majority to the strategy of social change: the co-operative members emphasize the provision of social services for its members but it is not directly associated with action for social change in practical terms, that is, an action that influences the structures of society. I would rather call it a task of social maintenance. The women believe that changes at the level of the beneficiaries can be as important as the so-called ‘social changes’. For instance, to prevent a patient from being admitted into a psychiatric hospital as a result of improvement undergone with the help of the woman assisting, is something which cannot be quantified.
5.2 CONCLUSIONS

Co-operative action is born not of choice but of the obligation of the socio-economic conditions in which the women find themselves. Cohesion, action, organization come from the fact that it is impossible to build one's own life in the present market economy. The collective responses are the translation of necessity. The obstacles met and the possibilities offered lead to action in the form of a co-operative enterprise.

The BCS stands as an enterprise of the social economy responding to the market's economic discrimination against women's collectively. The BCS has the merit of questioning ethically the issue of the objectives of the pure economic activity. They women conscious efforts to balance the social and economic goals of the co-operative, economic goals in terms of productivity, marketing, etc., along with the social goals related to the social life of the co-operativists and the collectivities they work with. Distribution of employment, betterment of women's quality of life, and 'dignifying' of working conditions are some of the issues which are taken seriously into account. It is obvious that the co-operative does not have all the answers to all the questions but it does indicate a kind of enterprise which is more at the service of the person and humankind.
The BCS is a co-operative which operates in relation to certain pre-established ideas coming from the co-operative ideology. The nature of the co-operative is in its aim defined by those women who work in co-operation. Co-operativism and the social economy are systems of reference from which they deduce practical modes of operating based on co-operative principles. Participation, equality, solidarity are ways of making women active subjects in their lives. No doubt participation in socio-economic life enhances self-worth and self-esteem. Simultaneously, a healthy self-esteem influences the quality of action. The co-operative ideology, as a body of values and principles, leads to certain determined forms of action aimed at achieving specific socio-economic goals for the weaker sections of society, in this case women.

The co-operative, however, in one way or another, has to resist the imperatives of the capitalist society in which it operates, a capitalist society which propagates different values from those of the social economy. In this sense, the co-operative is an organizational alternative to the actual socio-economic system. In the BCS it is accepted by most of the women, fully assumed by the main leaders, and simply not thought about by the rest because beyond ideological considerations there is an economic need which has to be met. However, the unity of thought and action is difficult to maintain in a market economy where the co-operative is either directly or indirectly
submitted to the pressure of the neo-liberal economy which often imposes upon it a route rather than a choice.

The Spanish socio-economic system generates accepted types and styles of marginalization and thus creates social services that must ensure the survival of those individuals in dire necessity. In this context the BCS represents a structure to provide responses to the concrete problems and needs of certain collectivities which need physical or/and psychological assistance.

This type of enterprise appears to be more a psycho-socio-economic enterprise. The co-operative plays the role of maintenance of the women’s well-being. A safety valve for their social problems. The therapeutic value of the co-operative is obvious while talking to the women. Status, self-esteem, a sense of direction and accomplishment contribute to help them live a more meaningful life. The isolated women’s existence at home directs them towards work outside the home in search also of self-realization. The rewards may be largely economic but the psycho-social considerations are highly valued by the great majority of the interviewed members. The collective identity, participative processes, the sense of ownership with regard to the enterprise, the human relationships, developed in the co-operative contribute largely to their prestige and social recognition.
The co-operative provides the conditions in which the women do what they want to, what they have to, and what they should do. There are chances for experiencing their new-found self which make them proactive individuals giving them free rein to pursue their practical visions. The co-operative provides a new socio-cultural space to the women where commonalities are the basis for empathic relationships. This new environment is playing a positive role in developing a new culture in which the latent qualities of these women can emerge. Since it is an organisation managed by women and for women they become the subjects of their own development. The absence of men precludes any man-women conflict, it becomes easier, more comfortable to operate when they do not have to face the competitiveness and criticism of men. Moreover, the organisation provides a space in which these women find a new collective identity based on the common problems they face and on the new attitudes and perspective they develop.

The co-operative is supported by a powerful collectivity of women aware that their transforming powers depend a great deal on the economic factor. Economic resources are mobilized so that the social activities will not be reduced to mere demanding actions. However, it is not a mere financial dependence that is to be faced but the relations of inequality at home. Economic independence definitely has an effect on the women's self-image but it is not always the case. The new financial situation does not yet adequately encompass the newly
arising family situations. The surfacing contradictions between the family and the professional life of the women are not dealt with only by providing support. They experience the contradictions between two different environments which blur the distinction between right and wrong and make guilt the prevalent feeling. The woman has to struggle to be a perfect wife and mother along with being a good co-operativist. She runs from housework to the work place and holds together the conflicting circumstances of her life.

The co-operative becomes a place where the conflicts and contradictions of an unjust social situation are compensated, but not changed at the root level. Only to the extent that the entire social life of the women is thought through and transformed considering their necessities, can a new type of equality beyond male and female roles be gradually attained. This struggle remains as a personal matter for each woman rather than an organisational one. The lack of a gender perspective and analysis of the socio-economic repercussions on women's lives leaves me with a question mark: to what extent in dealing with women's problems can the treatment of symptoms be a substitute for the removal of the causes?

Inequality is being reinforced by the "Women's stereotyped qualities". This qualities become a trap when adopted and assumed so as to comply with society's expectations (husband, children, colleagues, friends,). The social stereotype of a 'good' woman is very
detrimental to the women's self. These qualities elicit personal and social abuse. These 'good qualities' turn into a straitjacket. Some women have accepted this stereotype as the truth and are not fully aware that this model is not at all the reality their self. Being 'good' is a source of unhappiness and self-sacrifice. Some of them have fallen into the compulsive need to be perfect according to the male-chauvinist society. Being fully a woman means also being assertive in expressing one's beliefs and opinions; taking care of oneself even at the cost of others; loving oneself as much as one has been told to love others; not trying to be adaptable; understanding oneself because one's ability to understand and put oneself in the skin of others is a means of justifying others' misunderstandings or justifying the absolute absence of being understood by those surrounding the woman. In other words, thinking a little of oneself is humility. Thinking oneself little is self-humiliation.

Those women who are more aware of their inner dynamics - which cover the functions of one's body, mind, emotions and states of consciousness, are more capable of understanding the relationship between their inner and outer lives. This understanding makes them grow in security and freedom; this was reflected in their style of relationships and action. In fact, they were remarkable leaders in the co-operative. In this sense, awareness which facilitates understanding of oneself in relation to the external world and its influence on the shape of the self should be included in the formation.
The women who do not integrate in the co-operative tend to see themselves as individuals in a group instead of individuals integral to the group. This could be the result of one of the weaknesses of the BCS: the absence of team-work formation. Knowledge in group formation, relations, rules and dynamics are fundamental requisites for successful team-working and effective participation.