



ERSTA  
SKÖNDAL  
BRÄCKE  
UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE

Ersta Sköndal Bräcke Högskola  
Institutionen för socialvetenskap  
Socionomprogrammet 210 hp

## **Empowerment through Art**

**Non-governmental organisations' art projects' contribution to empowerment of marginalised groups in Mexico City and San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Mexico**

Ivana Baljkas  
Socialt arbete och kunskapsutveckling 30 hp  
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Examensarbete i Socialt Arbete  
Supervisor: Johan Vamstad  
Examiner: Pelle Åberg

*“Regardless of subject matter, form, or content, whether art is overtly political or not, artistic work that emerges from an unfettered imagination affirms the primacy of art as that space of cultural production where we can find the deepest, most intimate understanding of what it means to be free.”*

bell hooks



Frida Kahlo's table at La Casa Azul - The Frida Kahlo Museum

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the ways marginalised groups can be supported in their empowerment process, and specifically how art projects organised by non-governmental organisations can contribute in the process. The focus is on prisoners and indigenous children and adults in Mexico City and San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Mexico who are involved in the organisations' projects. Results from qualitative interviews with organisations' staff are presented and discussed covering organisations characteristics and relationship with the clients as factors in supporting the clients in their empowerment. Involvement in art projects influenced participants' self-awareness, self-confidence, sense of achievement, gender roles and the way they cooperate with each other. The findings also show art projects as a possibility for marginalised groups to tell about their own lives and by doing so change stereotypes about themselves. The discussion focuses on interpreting these effects of working with art projects as empowering factors. It is suggested that working with art and in the non-governmental sector can complement the welfare system and serve as an inspiration to finding other ways of achieving empowerment. A closer look at how the non-governmental organisations work and relate to their clients, shows a more equal relationship than the one within the welfare systems, which opens up for more options of supporting marginalised individuals through their empowerment processes. The results of this research are based on the perception of the organisation's employees, not the users themselves. Therefore it would be interesting to continue research on this topic, interviewing the users in order to get the marginalized people's perspective on the issue.

Keywords: Empowerment, Social work, Non-governmental organisations, Mexico, Marginalized groups, Indigenous people, Prisoners, Art

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## **Abbreviations**

CPP - Chiapas Photography Project

CTP - Penitentiary Theatre Company of Santa Martha Acatitla

GPA - Global Pediatric Alliance

IACHR - Inter-American Commission on Human rights

IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs

NGO - non-governmental organisation

UN - United Nations

## Foreword

Moving to Sweden in my adult age after growing up in Croatia, I have experienced the enriching possibilities of learning from another culture, society and traditions. During my studies to become a social worker in Sweden, it was important for me to get insights into other countries and their ways of dealing with social issues so that I could gain a wider perspective. During our second year of the programme, I went to Greece to look into issues connected to refugees' integration through work possibilities, in the context of the country having gone through an economic crisis and being one of first European stops for the refugees.

This time, for my thesis, I chose Mexico for more personal reasons. For years I have been inspired by and interested in Frida Kahlo, a famous Mexican painter. Reading a biography of Frida Kahlo by Hayden Herrera (1989/1983) I understood that Frida, struggling with the consequences of a traffic accident all her life, has become a symbol of expressing pain and her life's story through art. Her relationship with another famous painter, Diego Rivera, and her behaviour and attitudes that differed from the traditional image of women, made her stand out as a woman breaking gender roles and challenging social rules. Frida Kahlo was political both in her art and her actions being a member of the Communist party. Her Mexican identity was very strong and she had even changed the year of her birth to 1910 to coincide with the start of The Mexican Revolution, the struggle of Mexican people against the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz (Herrera, 1989/1983). During and after the Revolution artists were a part of defining Mexican identity, both on an individual self-discovery level and as a larger social project (Kennicott, 2016, December 27).

Another important event in Mexican history was the Zapatista rebellion in 1994 in Chiapas, one of the southern states, marking the beginning of the Zapatistas' struggle for the rights of indigenous people and in general against the exploitation of the people by those in power (Zapatista Army of National Liberation, 2005). Zapatistas use poetry, photography, embroidery, paintings and murals to communicate their message and to earn money for the movement. Frida inspired me to take a closer look into how art can be used as a tool, a way of transformation, and Zapatistas, who are active in the state of Chiapas, inspired me to focus on organisations working outside the state system. I was inspired by the radical social work perspective that sees the state, political parties and organisations in power as the oppressors of the people, stating that the only way to empower people is to help them fight the oppressing system and their subordinate position in it (Healy, 2014).

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background

### 1.1.1. Marginalised groups and empowerment within and outside the welfare system

Social activist and author bell hooks defines marginalised groups as groups that have been systematically denied access to resources like knowledge and information (hooks, 1995). Denied or limited access to resources is a result of historical oppression and exploitation. In her book “Art on my mind: visual politics” hooks focuses on the art world that acknowledges some groups more than others, limits access to resources for marginalised groups making it more difficult for their artistic production to get visibility. One way of making some resources available to marginalised people is supporting them to feel empowered to search for and demand the resources they need to improve their position, production and lives.

Empowerment can be defined as giving individuals and groups possibilities and support to influence their own lives (Karlsson & Börjeson, 2011) with the goal to change the conditions that caused their weak and powerless position in society (Askheim, 2007). From the critical social work perspective it is difficult to achieve these changes working within the oppressing system (Healy, 2014). Looking at the welfare system, we can see an unbalanced relationship between users and help providers, since the latter are the ones who define the situation and the conditions that the users have to fulfil in order to receive help (Karlsson & Börjeson, 2011). Although social work in Latin America has undergone many changes and become more participatory, having empowerment as a goal, it is still influenced by traditional perspective with the controlling roles of social workers (Pereyra, 2008).

One way of contributing to empowerment is working outside the welfare system, in non-governmental organisations (NGOs). NGOs (also called non-profit, civil society organisations) are citizens’ groups that can range from small and informal to big, national or international with professional staff (Lewis, 2010). They can have different goals ranging from providing goods to promoting social transformation and action taking on important roles in social development and human rights (ibid.). NGOs can be funded by the government through different project fundings and/or by smaller or bigger foundations. This can make them dependent on those funders and influence what topics they chose to deal with in their projects. Nevertheless, NGOs’ relationship with clients is not based on power as much as within the social services and other state institutions. NGOs need to take into account the users’ perspective in order for their projects to be successful and fulfill their funding requirements. The relationship between an NGO and its clients can therefore be more cooperative and equal, compared to the relationship between clients and social services’ help providers. This gives possibility for another way of working, another way of creating alliances and another way of empowering individuals that is more in line with the definition of empowerment.



### 1.1.2. Art in social work

Yet another approach that opens for new possibilities to working with empowerment is including art in social work practices. Various research has shown that involvement in art and creative activities can encourage people to define themselves, connect with others and speak out about their experiences (Moxley, 2013). Art can be defined as primarily relational, instead of aesthetical, with focus on connecting different groups of people and creating grounds for mutual understanding (Bourriaud, 1998/2002). Both Bourriaud (1998/2002) and hooks (1995) talk about art as no longer a luxury belonging only to certain groups and levels of society. Art should be accessible to everyone, it should emerge from freedom of expression and evoke various emotions. Furthermore, art should be transgressing boundaries and challenging institutionalised systems of domination (hooks, 1995).

### 1.1.3. Marginalised groups in Mexico

Marginalised groups, with denied access to resources and with difficulties in achieving their human rights and potentials, are various in Mexico. In this research, the focus is on indigenous adults and children, and prisoners. Since gender appeared as an important factor when talking about children's characteristics important for their empowerment, specifics of women's position are also explained.

Mexico has the largest indigenous population and the highest number of languages in the Americas. Depending on the definition, the percentages of indigenous people vary: 10,6 percent of Mexican people live in indigenous households, 6,5 percent of the population speaks an indigenous language and 21,5 percent describe themselves as indigenous people (National Institute of Statistics and Geography, <https://www.inegi.org.mx/>).

According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) indigenous people are facing a lot of challenges, the main ones being lack of recognition, health and human rights issues (de Val, Pérez Martínez and Sánchez García, 2019). Indigenous people have lower life expectancy, higher maternal and infantile mortality rates, problems with malnutrition, and are facing severe limitations in accessing health services (ibid.). Another problem that affects indigenous people is forced displacement because of construction of various big projects going through their territories, planned without any consultations and putting them in a vulnerable position affecting their health, food and living conditions (UN General Assembly, 2018). Indigenous men and women's rights in criminal proceedings are threatened by the system not respecting their right to an adequate defense, interpreter or translator, and the right to have their identity recognized (IACHR, 2015).

There is a lack of gender perspective in the society including the state and the justice system that discriminates against women, and especially indigenous women (UN General Assembly, 2018). Indigenous women are in an extra vulnerable position facing multiple discrimination because of their gender, language and class (National Citizens' Observatory on Femicide, 2012).

It is clear that the indigenous people, and especially indigenous women in Mexico are in a vulnerable marginalised position since their basic human rights are not respected and they do not have the same access to social institutions as the non-indigenous population.

Another vulnerable group are men incarcerated in Mexico's prisons. Amnesty International reports that police targets young men living in poverty, who have previous experience of being discriminated (Amnesty International, 2018). Characteristic of the justice system and conditions in prisons violate several human rights, according to the same report. People are being detained and investigated without charge, without access to information about their case, and are not being informed about their rights during the process. In prisons they face fear of ill-treatment and torture and unjust legal process. If people ending up in prisons are already discriminated, low-educated and poor, they are in need of help and support during their time in prison and encouragement and help with building a self-image of a capable, empowered individual ready for life once out of the prison.

## **1.2. Relevance for social work**

Leonard, Hafford-Letchfiels and Couchman (2018) write about growing evidence in favour of arts and humanities helping social workers and their clients to better communicate their experiences. Art helps individuals develop their potential for creativity and readiness to change. Artistic creative processes can help rise above cultural differences and can therefore be a good method for working with people with different backgrounds.

Art is not only useful for social workers in their engagement with clients, but can even contribute to a better social work education. Using art in social work education would mean integrating more creative methods of teaching that can especially be empowering for those students with diverse backgrounds and previous experiences (ibid.).

Although there is a lack of Swedish published research on this matter, it appears to be a topic of interest for a number of social work students who wrote about it in their graduation thesis. This research will hopefully contribute by adding one more title to the list making art and its potential more visible in social work and social work research.

## **1.3. Problem statement**

Considering the challenges to empowerment of the people within the same system that is part of their oppression and with the help of professionals employed by that system, it can be worthwhile to explore the possibilities of working outside the welfare system using non-traditional methods. Non-governmental organisations have more autonomy and can have more open and flexible relationships with their clients in comparison to welfare state organisations. Existing research shows that art is an important medium for social change (Moxley, 2013) which is why it was interesting to explore the ways marginalised groups can be supported by non-government organisations working

with art projects. Both indigenous people and prisoners are marginalised groups whose rights and resources are limited, and so is the trust they have for the government systems which is why non-governmental organisations can have an important role in their empowerment.

#### **1.4. Aim of the study and research questions**

The aim of this research is to look into different approaches to working with marginalised people with the goal of supporting them in their empowerment processes. By talking to professionals working with marginalised groups in the context of non-governmental sector, research aims to explore art projects as a method and understand its effects on the empowerment process of the participants. The study focuses on different marginalised groups (prisoners, indigenous adults and children) in Mexico City and San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Mexico.

This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. How can marginalised groups be supported in their empowerment process?
2. How can art projects contribute to the empowerment process of marginalised groups?

## **2. Theoretical frameworks**

Along with theories about empowerment, a number of complementary theories were needed to help analyse research results. Since the focus of this research is on empowering individuals outside the state welfare system, perspectives on politics and power relations in society were included to help analyse the results. Men and women have been assigned with gender roles which influence both their behaviour and the way society treats them. Since some of the qualities and stereotypes about gender roles have importance for the empowering process, gender perspective was included in the analyses as well. Bourriaud's relational definition of art was used in this research and is also presented in this chapter.

### **2.1. Empowerment**

Askheim (2007) writes about empowerment as both theories and methods. Theories about empowerment include looking at empowerment both as a process and a goal. They cover different ways for individuals to take control over their lives with power, control, self-confidence and pride as central components. Empowerment requires development of another way of thinking about oneself (to see oneself as worthy and capable) and society (to see possibilities of influence and change). Social workers can contribute to their clients' empowerment by using different methods (ibid.). Social workers should take the clients wishes and opinions into account, and they should encourage clients' initiatives in taking an active role in society. Social workers should also help remove the obstacles to clients' integration into society. They should help their clients to improve their awareness and self-confidence in defining what kind of help they need from society. By cooperating with local organisations and networks, social workers can both learn from them and support them in their social engagement. Finally, a new way of thinking about social workers' professional role should be promoted, one that includes being political and engaging in policy and lobbying in order to influence decisions towards justice and equality (ibid.).

Tengqvist (2007) points out that most of the organisations working with empowerment see it as a process during which individuals' identities change from being dominated by problems and low self-esteem to identities they are proud of. Individuals' view of themselves can be negatively influenced both by how other people and society see them (as less worthy, passive and incapable of solving their own problems) and by the help they receive from the social services (making them into passive receivers of help). These negative attitudes are in contradiction with a positive humanistic view that sees people as active subjects who know and want their own best, under the right circumstances, a view common to all perspectives and theories on empowerment (Askheim 2007). Joining different organisations and coming together with people in similar situations can give individuals the support and the encouragement they need to start talking about their experiences of humiliation and inferiority

(Starrin, 2007). This collective empowerment makes it easier to change society's order and fight for one's worth. Organising oneself can also include public demonstrations and expressions as public speeches or simply carrying the symbols of the organisation and the common fight. This can challenge the prevailing patterns and worldviews and give energy and hope to subordinated individuals.

## **2.2. Critical social work**

Critical social work theories cover a range of perspectives (radical, Marxist, feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppressive among others) while having some common key features (Healy, 2014). Critical social work looks at power relations and aims at transforming them on every level of social practice. It focuses on macro-social structures (like capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism) and their influence on social life and relations between people. While these dominant structures (those in power, privileged, the oppressors) impose their ideologies and create social systems that make people accept these ideologies as their own, it is the social workers' role to raise awareness and critical consciousness among the users (the underprivileged, the oppressed) to help them understand that the cause of their problems is in the unjust social system. The goal is empowerment of the oppressed so they can change their own lives and act collectively to achieve social change (ibid.).

Critical social work emphasizes the inherent contradictions of the social worker role (Healy, 2014). Being the agents of the state, social workers should be conscious of the oppressive circumstances they work in and the effects that their controlling practice has on the clients. A part of their role should be challenging state practices and policies and reacting upon injustice on every level of their practice.

This perspective was needed to interpret the results of this research with the power relations in mind and the ways they influence working with the underprivileged, marginalised groups.

## **2.3. Pedagogy and Theatre of the oppressed**

Paolo Freire, Brazilian educator and philosopher, discusses the problems with the banking concept of education and relates it to the oppression of the people. He explains that the education system serves the oppressors since it treats people as passive receivers of knowledge and roles imposed on them (Freire, 1970/2000). That way the system produces adaptable human beings who do not think critically or creatively. Those people can easily be dominated and will not try to change the situation of oppression they are in. According to Freire, this is achieved both by the educational system and the welfare system. In the "paternalistic social action apparatus" the oppressed are treated as "individual cases, as marginal persons who deviate from the general configuration of a "good, organized, and just" society" (ibid., p. 73). Freire emphasized the importance of dialogue that requires and generates critical thinking. Naming the world in the name of others, is not dialogue.

Freire's theories cover a number of factors important for the empowerment process, including society's view on people and the relationship and communication between the help providers and those in need of help.

Theatre of the oppressed was developed as an idea by Augusto Boal. Boal, a Brazilian theatre practitioner, drama theorist and political activist, who developed different methods and forms within theatre that can help the oppressed to overcome their role and give them the right to speak and by that the right to be. According to him, the aesthetic process gives us opportunities to exercise activities which allow the development of expressive and perceptive abilities (Boal, 2006) Theatre has the potential to help us discover who we are, who we could become and how we can change ourselves and the world (Boal, 1974/ 2008). Those kinds of activities and possibilities are important because they are usually not available to the oppressed. The oppressed are usually not producing culture and knowledge, on the contrary, their role is the one of consumers of cultural goods produced by someone else (Boal, 2006). Boal's writings on interactive theatre can be applied to other creative methods and mediums that can create opportunities for (self) discoveries and communication with others contributing to the empowerment processes.

Pedagogy and Theatre of the oppressed give perspectives on the importance of environments where individuals can communicate with each other on equal terms and use creativity to explore themselves and the society around them, which is why these perspectives were useful for interpretation and discussion of the results.

#### **2.4. Feminist theories and gender roles**

Gender research and gender theories define gender as something that is constructed by the society (Mattsson, 2015) According to those theories gender is not a result of biology but of socialisation and is therefore not constant throughout different cultures and times. Gender roles perceptions and rules about appropriate characteristics and behaviors for a certain gender are dependent on social, historical and cultural context (ibid.). Masculinity and femininity norms are thought and encouraged by defining desirable and undesirable behaviour of male and female children. Children grow into a society getting to learn how a woman or a man should behave. Gender is constructed by language and actions, the way we speak, behave and the way we interpret and encounter others where we encourage certain behaviours or ways to be (ibid.).

There are several feminist theories and approaches who differ but have in common a basic understanding of society having a clear power structure where men are in a higher position than women (Mattsson, 2015). According to Marcos (1999) power structures between men and women in Mexico have been determined by "machismo" which is a "patriarchal societal rule" giving men all the rights and women all the duties. Machismo and marianismo are gender ideologies that imply which behaviours and characteristics are associated and desirable in men and women in Mexico (Englander,

Yáñez & Barney, 2012). Machismo and marianismo are masculinity and femininity in Mexican context and according to those ideologies men are considered and expected to be dignified and to have self-respect, while women should be humble and submissive (ibid.).

Gender perspective was needed to interpret the results concerning perceived differences in girls' and boys' behaviours and characteristics that were identified as some of the important contributors to the empowerment process.

## **2.5. Relational art**

Art can be defined in various ways, and one might even argue there is no clear definition nor way of knowing what art is. Nicolas Bourriaud's defines art as relational, as "an activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects" (Bourriaud, 1998/2002, p. 107). This perspective on art emphasises human interactions and social context rather than aesthetic and cultural goals. Bourriaud sees art as an interactive, user-friendly and relational concept that has the possibility to connect people from different realities who would otherwise rarely meet. Important issues that artists should raise are art's links to society, history and culture. Relational art gives space for interaction and dialogue around those issues. Art comes from the meeting between different levels of reality and is inviting people to dialogue. Bourriaud's view on art and its role in human relations and society was used in this research as a starting point since it emphasizes art's role in raising important social issues as well as influencing dialogue and human interactions.

### **3. Previous research**

Articles were searched for at Academic Search Complete databases using the following search words: art and social work, culturally engaged art, art in prisons, art and indigenous people, art and empowerment, gender and self-esteem, gender roles, Mexico. Research presented here was chosen with the aim to cover various countries, groups of people and art activities in connection to social work, empowerment and the effects of art projects on the people involved. In addition, a research conducted in Oaxaca, Mexico giving the indigenous peoples' perspective on empowerment is presented. And finally, research on connections of self-esteem and gender was chosen to give background and help analyse the results with gender perspective in mind.

#### **3.1. Art and empowerment**

Research project "What does the culture do" is an empirical critical analysis whose aim was to understand the complex connection between culture and well-being (Gustafsson, 2015). Research analysed culture's content, role and importance in working with older people. It was shown that cultural activities bring memories, evoke emotions and give opportunities for feelings of achievement and trust in one's own strength. Research results also show how involvement in an art activity at home for the elderly changes the relationships between the caregivers and caretakers. They become more equal which creates balance and reciprocity which in return improves the quality of care. Cultural activities, like painting or singing, give opportunities for both caregivers and caretakers to see each other in a new context and from a new perspective. In those activities, they are side by side under the "leadership" of the artist. In all the other situations, caretakers are usually dependent on caregivers and it is caregivers who have more power, while in art activities they are side by side under the guidance of a third person, activity moderator. Culture is therefore more than just entertainment, it is also intervention. It has the potential to change the working environment making it more equal and democratic. The author uses the word culture for the activities I define as art (such as singing or painting workshops), and therefore I have included this research since we are talking about the same things, only calling them by different name.

Mukhuba (2017) analysed South African women writings and came to conclusions about writing as a way to both discover oneself and present oneself to others. The author labels most of the writing as "work of the disempowered articulating their voice and reclaiming agency and authority" (s. 8600). Women used art as a way to assert themselves and to change society's stereotypes. Through writing one can express their own personality even if writing fictional stories. Mukhuba calls fiction "indirect autobiography" since it reflects and represents the writer's self. Fictionalised characters and stories enable exploring and commenting on existing social norms.



Boehm and Boehm (2003) did a case study of a group of six women, a social worker and a director involved in a community theatre project in Israel. They define community theatre as a theatre where community members are involved and leading the project whose aim is to raise community issues. Their results show that involvement in the project contributed to members' empowerment by enabling them to express their inner voice and influencing their self-esteem. Involvement in the project raised women's awareness of their conditions, resources and limitations. Women became more aware of their capabilities to effect change and started taking a more active role and showing initiative. This research showed that involvement in a community theatre, besides contributing to women's empowerment, affected also their spontaneity and creativity. They were able to transfer stories from their life into the play and through acting, practice new ways of approaching situations. Here they could voice their opinions, express their emotions, and practice taking action.

Sonn and Quayle (2014) studied a community based arts program led by a community cultural development agency in rural Western Australian Communities with a relatively large Aboriginal population. Their results show that participation in those projects opened up new ways of knowing and doing. Participants learned new skills and became more active participants in their communities. They experienced both having fun and healing by sharing their stories which additionally helped them to deal with social issues.

Rawdon and Moxley (2016) give examples of positive effects of different art projects on the participants. One of them is engaging homeless people in a visual arts project which resulted in increased self-esteem and self-worth together with the feeling of accomplishment. Expressing through art has also given the participants a way to release their anger and frustration.

Brewster (2015) gives an overview of interdisciplinary research on prison arts education. Research shows that prison arts education helps inmates develop a greater sense of self-worth, competence and accomplishment. Involvement in prison arts programs can improve inmates' academic performance, motivate them for getting or completing their education and also improves their discipline and work ethic. Brewster claims that prison arts programs can prepare inmates for the transition after they get out of the prison. He also talks about the relationship between inmates and their art instructors. Prison arts program evaluations have shown that art instructors become important mentors to inmates. One of the reasons is that the inmates perceive them as artists rather than authority figures.

### **3.2. Indigenous people's view on empowerment**

A Mexican research about empowerment of indigenous people in rural areas of Oaxaca included interviews to see how indigenous people themselves define empowerment and what is most important to them (Guevara-Hernández, McCune, Rodríguez-Larramendi & Ovando-Cruz, 2012). They found out that the indigenous people define empowerment in terms of dignity, unity, capacity for learning, increased capabilities, meeting new challenges and redistribution of assets in the community. To the

interviewed indigenous people both personal and collective empowerment are important. One of the key concepts in the result analyses was that dignity was defined both as respecting people's and community's identity and values but also respecting natural resources. The author talks about relational understanding of empowerment since it is seen as a transformation of human relations; changes in the relationships between people and between groups. These changes include transformation of economic and productive structures and shifting of power between social groups.

### **3.3. Gender roles and self-esteem**

Research overview shows men having higher levels of self-esteem than women (Bleidorn, et al., 2015). Most of the studies have used samples from the United States and Western industrialized countries, but Bleidorn et al. (2015) showed that the pattern is the same in Mexico. Gender difference in self-esteem in Mexico was in fact higher than the average of all countries involved in the research (48 countries). Gender gap in Mexico even increases over age, which is not the case in most other countries.

## **4. Method**

In this chapter methodological approach will be presented. Selection of the sample will be explained and the participants will be presented, together with information about the interviews and the data analyses process.

### **4.1. Qualitative approach**

This research is a qualitative study aiming to reach a better understanding of possible effects of working with artistic projects and marginalised groups, through examining the perspective of those working at the organisations implementing the projects. Data for the research has therefore been collected primarily by using qualitative unstructured interviews and secondarily by using material from organisations' websites and publications. Research has inductive approach aiming to reach understanding of a phenomena by analysing data (Bryman, 2012). For this reason the research questions were open without forming a hypothesis, and the interviews were qualitative and unstructured to leave room for participants to give their own view without being directed or influenced by the questions asked.

The research takes on the feminist approach that criticizes the hierarchical relationship between the researcher and participants. Interviewers often take the right to ask questions and put themselves in a higher position, as the ones who often think they know more than the interviewees, while feminist framework requires high degree of rapport and reciprocity (Bryman, 2012). Considering that I come from a "developed" country to do the research in a "developing" country, asking for the knowledge and experience of the NGOs and their users, it was very important to avoid the superiority attitude. All the participants were free to define what they wanted to talk about and in what way, they were informed of the process and the final results of the study. They were active participants, not only during the interviews but also later, having the possibility to give feedback to the interviewer on whether they were understood right and whether their story is presented in the right way.

### **4.2. Sample selection**

Due to the difficulties in finding and approaching marginalised people directly, I chose to talk to the people working in the organisations working with marginalised groups. Therefore participants in this research are employees of different non-governmental organisations, who work with marginalised groups through art projects.

Sample in this research is a convenience sample, meaning that it was chosen due to its availability (Bryman, 2012). Due to limitations in time and language, presented later in the text, there was a limited number of organisations available to participate in the research. I chose Mexico City as the capital where I hoped to find many different organisations working with different groups and art

projects; and San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas, one of the states with the largest number of indigenous people, since I wanted to focus on marginalised groups.

I have researched online, using google and Facebook, to find out about organisations (in Mexico City and San Cristóbal de Las Casas) working with socially engaged art activities. I have also asked the people I met if they could recommend an organisation. That way I found out about approximately 15 people or organisations that I then contacted. Some of them haven't replied, and some replied saying they did not speak English. Those that replied positively and those that I could arrange a translator were included in this research, which was 8 interviews with 14 people, covering six non-governmental organisations and one state organisation. Besides the non-governmental organisations, I interviewed a state organisation responsible for helping and organising cultural organisations in Mexico City. After talking to the non-governmental organisations a number of issues regarding the organisations structure and way of working appeared important and influential to both the relationship between the organisations and their clients and the type of support that the clients receive from the organisations. By talking to the Secretary of Culture I hoped to get an overview and a more generalised view of the issues expressed in the interview with the organisations. Out of the 14 respondents, 13 gave permission for their full name and role in the organisation to be used (explained more in the Presentation of the respondents).

#### 4.2.1. Presentation of the respondents and the organisations

In order to get a better understanding of the context that the respondents work in and that the marginalised groups come in contact with, besides presenting the people I interviewed, I will give an overview of the organisations they work in.

**Carlota from CPP.** Carlota Duarte, a Mexican-American artist, founded Chiapas Photography Project (CPP) in 1992. The organisation is based in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas and provides indigenous people with opportunities to learn about photography and become a part of various photography projects. Over 300 indigenous people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds have been involved in the organisations' projects ([www.chiapasphoto.org](http://www.chiapasphoto.org)). CPP photographers have had solo and group exhibitions both in Mexico and other countries. The organisation has been funded by donations from friends, small grants and contributions and from 1995 to 2012 by the Ford Foundation. There are three indigenous women working at the office, running the training program (office) and the projects. I have visited the organisation's office, seen their publications and met the women working there. I interviewed Carlota and the interview was conducted in English.

**Andrés and José from El 77.** El77 Self- managed cultural center (Centro Cultural Autogestivo, El 77 CCA) is a cultural, social and community center operated by the Social Impact area of Shakespeare Forum (Foro Shakespeare) located in Mexico City. The center organises educational, artistic and

cultural activities that are open to all and have free entrance. Their goal is to provide access to culture, to promote coexistence among citizens and cooperation between social impact organisations (<https://www.foroshakespeare.com/el77cca>).

El 77 cooperates with Penitentiary Theater Company of Santa Martha Acatitla (CTP), another social impact project of Shakespeare Forum, that organizes theatre plays inside the penitentiary with inmates as actors. Involvement in the theatre project requires being present at five-hour workshops four days a week. Aside from being actors, inmates can be involved in other roles such as set designers, writers and technicians. There are 22 inmates involved in the Company's work. A few of the former inmates are currently working for El 77 and CTP. Besides theatre inside the prison, El 77 and CTP cooperate to organise theatre plays with former inmates, at a theatre in the city.

I interviewed Andrés Márquez and José Carlos Balaguer from El 77. The interview was in English, with Andrés helping with translating for José when needed.

**Clara, Fernando and Alex from GPA.** Global Pediatric Alliance (GPA) is an organisation whose goal is to improve child and maternal health in vulnerable, rural areas in Chiapas, Mexico and Chimaltenango, Guatemala. The organisation is providing educational, technical and financial support to local communities to empower traditional birth attendants (midwives) and community health workers (<https://www.globalpediatricalliance.org/>). I visited the organisation working in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas where I interviewed two employees and one external collaborator.

Clara Rubio Bareddo is the Training Program Assistant Director, a sociologist with a master in gender studies. She works on the GPA team that implements the midwife training program in several municipalities in Chiapas. Fernando Brito Vera was, at the time of the interview, working at GPA as a program coordinator for youth leadership. Besides organizing and participating in the midwife training program Fernando is leading workshops for the Youth Leadership Training Program which was the focus of our interview. Workshops are organized for children and teenagers in marginalised communities in Chiapas. They cover topics such as gender equality, violence, addiction, sexual and reproductive health and HIV. In this program Fernando cooperated with an artistic collaborator Alex.

Interviews with Clara and Fernando were conducted in English, while the interview with Alex was conducted with the help of Fernando translating between me and Alex. Alex is the only one of the respondents being presented only by his first name since I did not get the chance to ask him in person, and afterwards failed to reach him (he does not use a mobile phone).

**Yolanda and Sandra from Sueniños.** Desarrollo Educativo Sueniños Ac is an organisation whose name, Sueniños, is a combination of two Spanish words: sueños meaning dreams and niños meaning children. It was founded in 2005 by Alma Silva Gutierrez (Sinaloa, Mexico) and Cristian Szinicz

(Austria) who wanted to help indigenous children from vulnerable areas ([www.sueninos.org](http://www.sueninos.org)). Their office in Austria helps with contacts to partners and donors in Austria and does fundraising in Europe. The central goal of all the organisation's programs is sustainability - promoting independence among children, adolescents and parents. They organize educational programs for primary school children, youth and training centers, vocational training for teenagers and workshops for parents. Several hundred children and adolescents attend their programs every year. I visited the organisation in their spacious wooden house with handmade lamps and artwork made by children, located in the northern outskirts of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas.

The organization's art program was, at the time of the interview, led by Yolanda Pérez Hernández, who I interviewed. Yolanda spoke mostly in Spanish, and translators on this occasion were Edrei González Hernández from Colectivo Xu' and Sandra Robledo, a former student. Present at the interview was also one of the organisation's volunteers and Annica Frank, my classmate who interviewed the same organisation for her research. My classmate's focus was mostly on getting to know the organisation and the circumstances and lives of children they educate which served as an introduction about the organisation for both of us. After that I continued to interview about the specifics of working with art programs.

**Edrei from Colectivo Xu'.** Colectivo Xu' is an organisation, founded in 2016, that organises cultural and artistic activities in schools and communities in remote areas of Chiapas, with the goal of contributing to social transformation. The name means "you can do it" in the Tzotzil, which is one of the indigenous languages. They mostly work inside schools because the areas they go to can be unsafe. They approach schools with their project and some agree to participate but there have been cases of disapproval from some people in the communities. They receive donations both from local people and foreigners (money or materials) and they earn some money by giving English lessons through an organisation called Chiapas Meeting Point. In most of the activities they get help from volunteers (they have had more than 30 volunteers so far).

I interviewed Edrei González Hernández, founder and president of the organisation. The interview was conducted in English.

**Kiki from Kikimundo.** Kikimundo is an art and design store in San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Founder of the store is Kiki Suarez, a painter and a psychotherapist, who also organises various activities for different groups of people in the community. Through the activities, Kiki collaborates with other social initiatives and works with topics such as social interaction and acceptance of differences, disabilities and illnesses, violence against women. She offers her space to different support groups for people with different diagnoses, people in grief, caretakers or family members, victims of domestic violence.

The interview was conducted in English and Annica Frank, my classmate, was also present in the role of a listener. As to all the respondents, I offered Kiki to send her the thesis so she can go over the parts where I mention and quote her in order to make sure I am representing her story in the correct way, but she had refused the offer and told me not to send her the text.

**Elí, Ana, Flor and Federico from Secretary of Culture.** Mexico City's Secretary of Culture (Secretaria de Cultura) is a state department for cultural development working with developing, coordinating and implementing public policies that guarantee full exercise of the cultural rights to individuals and communities (<https://cultura.cdmx.gob.mx/>). The department is not an NGO but a state cultural department which I interviewed to get a more general perspective of NGOs working with art projects, since the department is serving as a connecting point to different NGOs.

I interviewed Elí Evangelista Martínez, the director of community development, and his team of cultural promoters (Ana Vertiz, Flor Velasco Gutiérrez and Federico Patricio Meza Collins). The interview was conducted in Spanish, with a translator and was recorded.

**Indira.** Indira Santos has over ten years of experience working in the non-governmental sector, among others at Entreamigos (in Nayarit, Mexico) developing educational programmes for children and families, based on integration and collective community action. At the time of the research she was living in San Cristóbal and was interviewed to give her expert perspective on the issues this research aimed to investigate. The interview was conducted in English.

### **4.3. Data sources and analyses**

#### **4.3.1. Interviews**

The interviews were unstructured. There was a list of topics and questions (presented in Appendix) that were important to go over with the respondents, but they were formulated in different ways and were chosen depending on the context. Organisations work in different areas and with different projects and users, therefore questions that came up differed from one interview to another. The aim of the interviews was to approach each organisation with curiosity and with as few assumptions as possible. Each respondent was first asked to present the organisation and his or her role in it. From there on the questions depended on what they answered. Bryman (2012) writes about minimal structure's potential for helping in getting the aspects that the researcher otherwise might miss. He also writes about the benefits of submerging oneself in a social setting with less defined research focus and more general research questions, which is how I chose to conduct this research.

The form of an unstructured interview has a number of disadvantages. Potentially different focuses of each interview can result in a difficulty to compare answers from different interviews. It can also lead to the interviewer being less efficient since he or she has to adapt on the spot by choosing

different questions depending on the answers and the topics talked about which may result in missing important information or misunderstanding it. However, having in mind the disadvantages of this method, approaching the topic and the organisations with openness to focus on whatever comes out as important according to the respondents was seen as a priority and was the most important factor in the choice of the research method.

The interviews were conducted in March and April 2018 in the offices of the organisations and lasted from half an hour to three hours. Two of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, two in a mix of Spanish and English, and the rest in English. More details about the languages and translators used, and whether the interviews were individual or group, are presented in other chapters (Presentation of organisations and Limitations of the study). The interview at the Secretary of Culture was recorded. During the rest of the interviews I was writing down respondents' answers on paper.

#### 4.3.2. Data

Relevant parts of the recorded interview were transcribed. I read those transcriptions and notes from the rest of the interviews several times. First I was just reading the texts. Then I started marking the important parts (having in mind answering research questions), which lead to certain themes appearing. After that I was reading the text over and over, marking different themes, finding new themes and marking again, until I felt like I explored all the parts of the texts. After listing the themes/categories, I went over the texts again selecting marked parts and putting them in a category, keeping my eye open for parts I eventually missed and that now I could notice since I am focused on one category at a time. I worked with categories several times, renaming, rearranging them and putting them together. After the results analysis was written, it was sent to the respondents, together with the presentation of the organisations. I have gotten positive feedback (with only minor adjustments regarding practical info and few changes in words) from six respondents. I have made changes in the text according to their comments. One of the respondents had declined the option already at the time of the interview (Kiki Suarez). Two respondents (Fernando and Indira) I managed to reach but they have not sent their comments to me. Another two (Federico and Flora) have not responded to my email; for one of them I have received an email failure notification. And finally, I do not have Alex feedback since I had no way of reaching him.

Chiapas Photography Project's photography publications were also a useful source of data that I used for answering both research questions. They include texts from photography experts and texts and quotes from the photographers themselves which I considered important data to be included.

Even though the study's focus is on the perspective of the organisations' staff, and even though the available data from the perspective of the users is coming from other sources than my interviews, those data was used as an addition to the main research data since I considered it a valuable and important addition to the organisations' staff's perspective.



## **5. Method critical discussion**

Specific criteria used for assessment of qualitative studies is presented and discussed concerning the research. Limitations of the study, researcher's preconceptions and ethical considerations are presented in order to help the readers evaluate the quality of this research.

### **5.1. Trustworthiness and authenticity**

Definitions and criteria for assessing reliability and validity have been constructed for quantitative studies and require adapting in order to be used in qualitative studies, with some researchers even questioning whether they should be used at all in qualitative research (Bryman, 2012). Some of the issues are difficulties to repeat the study in the same conditions expecting the same results and the limited possibilities for generalizing results based on study cases or small samples. This is also the case with this study that used a convenience sample and unstructured qualitative interview as a way to gather data. Alternative criteria for the assessment of qualitative studies has been proposed by Lincoln and Guba who suggest trustworthiness and authenticity as the main criteria for qualitative studies (Bryman, 2012). These authors suggest that there are many images of social reality and therefore many descriptions of it, which is why the usual criteria for a quality of a research is difficult to apply.

Trustworthiness includes four criteria (Bryman, 2012). Two of them correspond to validity in the quantitative research: credibility of the research in the eyes of others which can be achieved by describing that the research methodology has followed the rules and by making sure that the respondents confirm the researchers results and conclusion; and transferability which includes giving detailed description of the social milieu of the conducted research giving others grounds for estimates of the transferability of results to other milieus. Ethical considerations taken into account when planning and conducting this research are presented, in addition to the description of the feminist approach focusing on the relationship with and respect for the respondents. With respondent validation, presenting the respondents with the final result of the research, giving them a chance to go over how their quotes are used and whether the image presented corresponds to what they meant to say in our interviews, I am hoping to show the credibility of the research and its results. The fact that the respondents were asked to review the text 3 years after the interviews makes it impossible for them to remember what they actually said. On the other hand, reading the text now and confirming it as truthful implies that their statements passed the test of time and that their opinions are unchanged. In the introduction to the study I have given a description of the situation of the marginalised groups in Mexico and in the results I am presenting the organisations hoping to give a context to the results and grounds for the transferability estimates.

Criteria that corresponds to reliability is dependability which is achieved by providing the reader with a complete and detailed description of all the phases of the research process, in order for the

readers to be able to assess the quality of the research and its conclusions. In this research I have tried to provide the readers with a detailed description of my research process, method choice and sample, interviews and data analysis steps.

Confirmability is the fourth criteria for trustworthiness and it includes the researcher acting in good faith, being aware of his or her own attitudes and expectations and minimizing their influence on the research results and conclusions. Preconceptions about the topics of the research and the country where the research was conducted, that might have influenced my selection and analyses of the results, are therefore presented.

Authenticity concerns the consequences of the research on the society and it includes a few general questions about whether the research gives a fair picture of the respondents, whether the research helps the respondents to better understand their social situation and possibly change it, including whether the research helped respondents understand the perception of others about social realities. Achieving authenticity is more challenging and not simple to assess. I believe that the involvement in the research, having to reply to different questions concerning their work and its consequences, has contributed to the respondents' better understanding of themselves, their work and the context that their organisation is in. Since those respondents that have given feedback on the research results have confirmed that what they said was presented correctly, I believe I can claim the research gives a fair image of the respondents.

## **5.2. Limitations of the study**

In order for the readers to be able to better assess the quality of the research, and to show to what extent I understand the limitations of this study and have taken it into account when making conclusions, I will now present the limitations of the study. Presented will be those aspects that I have considered, while I am aware that there might be more limitations that I have failed to see.

The limitations of this study are mostly connected to the researcher coming from another country, staying limited time and not knowing the language spoken in the country. Apart from those, other limitations are connected with using the convenience sample.

### **5.2.1. Sample**

The sample is a convenience sample which makes generalisation impossible. But even without generalisation as the goal of the research, the sample can influence the quality of the results. Wanting to give a general picture of how art is used and all the different ways it is used in and how art projects involve and affect different social groups I would have wanted to find more organisations to interview and present. The picture could have been bigger and more diverse. The fact that I wanted to get a broad picture of different art projects, and the fact that I could not afford to chose the organisations according to the type of projects they do (I had too little to chose from) makes the sample not as

homogenous it could be. This has led to describing general effects of various art projects on various marginalised groups without focusing on only one of them and going deeper in the analysis.

Another issue was interviewing only people working in the organisations and not participants in the projects. This way I have gotten only one side of the picture, with the exception of the inmates involved in the theatre company and a former Sueniños student Sandra Robledo, which was an unplanned bonus for the research. The main reason for not planning to interview the participants, besides lack of time, was the language - most of them did not speak English.

Sandra Robledo, a former student, was interviewed in the presence of Sueniños' employees. Considering she is no longer a user of the organisation but a volunteer and collaborator, it can be assumed that answers were not conditioned by the presence of Sueniños' staff. The reason she is involved in the organisation now is to give back what she received as a student which implies she has positive and honest feelings about the work of the organisation.

### 5.2.2. Language

There are two issues considering language. First, I do not speak Spanish and a lot of people I contacted did not speak English or had low confidence in their English knowledge. This influenced the sample in a way that those potential participants either did not reply or declined. Out of those who replied and wanted to be interviewed if I could provide a translator, some were refused because I was not able to find a translator and three were included after the translator was found.

The second factor is that English is not a native language either to me or almost any of the respondents. Only one of them had English as her native language, and that was Carlota Duarte from the Chiapas Photography Centre. I used a translator for the interviews with the Secretary of Culture, Alex from Global Pediatric Alliance and Yolandra from Sueniños. The translators used were mostly not educated or experienced translators (for English-Spanish) which may have influenced the understanding between me and the interviewees. This however did not seem to have happened, considering I do understand some Spanish, and that in all occasions there was one extra person who spoke both languages and could act as "control".

### 5.2.3. Time

Planning ahead was difficult for two reasons. One was due to changing the topic for my research after I arrived in Mexico, which resulted in contacting the organisations later than planned. Another reason was because the best way to find respondents was to contact them in person. I met the respondents either by visiting the organisation directly or by being recommended to organisations by people I have met. Most of the email approaches, without a reference, resulted in declines or lack of reply. For this reason it probably would not have helped even if I had contacted the organisations beforehand, while still in Sweden.

Another time issue is timing itself. I arrived in San Cristóbal a week before Easter holidays which postponed all the meetings for after Easter. If I could have stayed longer, I would have been able to get more participants since that is actually when I started getting the snowball effect - the more people I have met, the more new contacts I was getting. The fact that the participants were “showing up” unplanned and spontaneously resulted in very little time to prepare and for example arrange for a translator.

### **5.3. Preconceptions**

I was born in Croatia where I had lived for almost 30 years until I moved to Sweden 10 years ago. My background and perception of similarities between Croatia and Mexico may have influenced my perceptions and understanding of Mexico. In my perception, both countries have high corruption, unemployment and people struggling with economic situation. They also have minority groups and are influenced by a history of conflicts between these groups. They have similar views on women and women’s roles which are perpetuated in traditional and patriarchal society. Although these perceived similarities between Croatia and Mexico could have made me better understand Mexican people I was talking to, they could have also led to making wrong assumptions based on assumed understanding. Therefore, the fact that I perceive those similarities and have an idea that I have a base for understanding Mexico and its people could have influenced my interpretation of the conversations and affected my interviews even in a negative way.

I have a general positive attitude towards arts. I have read about and talked to people who work with art in different ways and have the impression that it enriches human lives and can have positive effects in a variety of situations. Even though my research question is open and not a hypothesis I am trying to prove, I have approached this research hoping to show the positive effects of arts which may have influenced my questions, my understanding of respondents’ statements and my results analyses.

### **5.4. Ethical considerations**

Research ethics can be described as achieving the balance between two criteria or imperatives (Good research practice, Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). One is about the importance of new knowledge and scientific research being one of crucial elements in society. Even if the knowledge is useful in itself, it is important to take into account what the research results will or can be used for and for whom they are useful. These considerations are to be put in perspective and balance with the other imperative which is the imperative to protect the individuals who are a part of the research. In doing the research I have taken into account all four of the steps recommended by the Swedish Research Council (2002) to protect the individuals involved in the research. All the participants were informed about the research, its questions and goals and where it will be published. They were informed that they can at any time decide to withdraw their consent, and to decline to answer my questions, regardless of the reasons and

without explanation. All the participants were offered to be anonymous. I have given the respondents my promise to keep them involved in the rest of the process by showing them my results and offering them the chance to correct misunderstandings about their statements. This was important in order to make sure I have understood them right and that I am “telling their story” in a way that feels correct to them.

Another ethical issue in this research has been awareness of the privileged background I am coming from. I have always tried to show that I am not taking for granted people’s agreement to be interviewed, to give me their time and their knowledge without having any direct reward for it. I have taken a position of not assuming I have the right to come, observe, take knowledge and experience of the people I meet.

## **6. Presentation and analysis of the results**

Presentation and analysis of results is divided into two parts, each answering one of the research questions.

### **6.1. How can marginalised groups be supported in their empowerment process?**

By asking open questions about the organisations, their projects and the staff's impression of the projects' influence on the participants, I had hoped to receive information relevant to the empowerment process not affected by the questions I asked. This did not turn out to be the case since I have received answers that touch on factors important for the empowerment process of the individuals that the organisations work with. Some of them are related to the characteristics of the organisations and their way of working that influence the relationship between the organisations and users which then helps the empowerment process of the users. Here I present them grouped into three themes.

#### **6.1.1. Equal roles and cooperation without hierarchy**

Carlota from the Chiapas Photography Project emphasizes that everything the organisation does is decided and organised in the team with everybody having an equal role. Carlota's intention has been to offer indigenous people photographic tools and materials without influencing their choice of themes and artistic approach (Camaristas, 2001). Besides the organisation's team itself, people in the community have direct influence since they can suggest the topics for the projects. Once a project begins all the participants learn from each other, Carlota calls it horizontal learning, meaning it is not professionals who teach the amateurs. It is team effort, cooperation and exchange of experiences.

Artist and psychotherapist Kiki Suarez emphasized the same things when talking about the support groups she organises. Her role is not the one of the therapist leading the group and knowing it all, she is equal to the others. There is no hierarchy and no experts in these groups.

Fernando from Global Pediatric Alliance had a more traditional approach to children in the beginning when he started. Then he changed his approach to become more equal to the children (speaking the same language, showing that he is not so much older than them) and it resulted in him being more open and gaining trust from the children.

Critique of the banking system of education and the "paternalistic" social welfare system is crucial in Freire's theory (Freire 1970/2000). He emphasizes the importance of a dialogue on equal grounds and explains that systems with uneven power relations are not educating people nor helping their empowerment but perpetuating the oppressing system. The topics of hierarchy, relationship and cooperation between those who are in the empowerment process and those helping them are important because if the relationship is based on equal grounds it allows for the empowerment to go on the terms of the marginalised.

### 6.1.2. Work opportunities

El 77 promotes strategies of social reintegration by creating work opportunities for inmates which can influence their earlier release from prison. Some of the indigenous photographers that learned about photography through the Chiapas Photography Project have gotten visibility through their exhibitions and have had offers for further career possibilities outside the organisation. The organisation also employs indigenous women who run the office and its projects. The possibility for the members of the marginalised groups to start working at the organisations gives them actual influence and shows that the change is possible.

Indigenous people view empowerment as relational, emphasizing transformation of human relations, including redistribution of assets in the community, transformation of economic structures and finally shifting of power between social groups (Guevara-Hernández et al, 2012). Possibilities of work and active roles within the organisations gives marginalised people some starting grounds for further development and making these changes possible.

### 6.1.3. Organisations' autonomy

The issue of funding and organisations' autonomy appeared as an important factor that influences the work of the organisations and their relationships with their clients. The Chiapas Photography Project (CPP), after the end of the Ford Foundation support, has sufficient funds from donations to continue for several years. Carlota from CPP explained that this gives them the freedom to choose their topics and projects. Colectivo Xu' is earning money on English lessons and they have started producing and selling calendars and T-shirts. Their goal is to be self-sufficient and not to have to rely on funding. Autonomy and self-funding is the goal of El77 as well. They are also investing in cooperating with other organisations so they can have exchange of experiences, workshops and services.

Artist Kiki Suarez talks about "anarquismo amorosa" as her philosophy (K. Suarez, personal communication, 11 April 2018). To be anarchist and spontaneous gives her freedom and reduces bureaucracy. She is running a store where she sells her art and then uses this money for the other projects. That way she can offer workshops and events for free or very cheap, depending on people's ability to pay. She likes the possibilities that this way of working gives her. Unplanned things happen, people get involved with activities, one person helping someone leads to that person helping another person or getting involved with a project. People approach her with ideas for projects (organising yoga workshops for example) and she can take those projects without having to depend on searching funds for them. She is in contact with a lot of people and organisations, and gives money to the people who need it. She appreciates that she can do that without bureaucracy that would otherwise be obligatory if she worked in the system.

Federico talked about encouraging organisations to be economically independent as one of the goals of the Secretary of Culture. They want the organisations to produce money for their social and

cultural activities and so that they can choose their own projects. The Secretary's goal is not to impose any way of doing things, but to accept and respect the rights of every collective to participate in the way they want and need.

From the critical social work perspective (Healy, 2014) real empowerment is difficult to achieve within the oppressing system or a system with unequal power positions. If the organisations are depending on the funding from the state they are in a position of less power and cannot act fully independent nor choose their projects which means that their clients have less possibilities for influence. If the role of the organisations is to help empower their members, that implies raising consciousness about the inequalities in the system and encouraging people to change the system. It is unlikely that the organisations can do that properly if they themselves are dependent on the same system. Ideally, organisations should serve as an example of a society that gives all the members possibilities for influence and teaches them about equal roles and cooperation. In that way, organisations show by their own exemple how an empowering environment should be and provide that environment for their users making it easier for them to develop and grow stronger.

## **6.2. How can art projects contribute to empowerment of marginalised people?**

The analyses of results revealed that art projects can influence the people involved in several ways and many of those can be recognized as important contributions to empowerment. Becoming more aware of yourself and expressing your feelings, feeling more confident in your own abilities to achieve goals, telling your own story to others and influencing their view of yourself, learning new ways to resolve conflicts and working in teams are all contributing factors that lead to more empowered individuals. Specifically for girls, daring to go outside their gender role and taking on more “masculine” characteristics can be an important factor in their empowerment process.

### **6.2.1. Self-awareness and expressing feelings**

Art can help in finding new ways to deal with and express feelings. Andrés from EI77 talked about how working with theatre helps prisoners to get more in touch with their personality and sensitivity. In prison where they have to be tough, working with theatre can help them to find their way back to their softer side, as Andrés expresses it:

You can do whatever you want with your feelings, they realise that they are alive, that they can feel, they look for freedom inside the jail. To own the character and do something with the character and the story - what do you feel and what are you going to do about it? They have to confront themselves when they are telling their story, to find a true, sensible way to tell their stories; you have to confront yourself every time you step into theatre practice. (A. Márquez, personal communication, 19 March 2018)

It is not only prison that makes it difficult for prisoners to show their feelings, it is also their gender role. As Andrés explains, men are not supposed to be emotional and show their feelings and through their work with theatre they learn to do exactly that.



When talking about projects in Ludotecas (play libraries that organise activities for children to help their educational and social development), Flor from the Secretary of Culture explains that children come from difficult circumstances where they are used to repress themselves, or have violent expressions. Through workshops they learn to express themselves and relate in new and better ways.

Yolanda from Sueniños talks about the therapeutic effect of art because through art students can express what is bothering them. When talking about her experience as a Sueniños student, Sandra said she felt like she can say whatever she wants through a painting, “all you need is a paper and pen” (S. Robledo, personal communication, 12 April 2018). She also emphasizes the importance of freedom, saying that Yolanda as a teacher gives students freedom to express themselves in a way that feels right for them.

Art as a way to discover and express oneself is present in research which shows writing as a way to express your own personality even if writing fictional stories (Mukhuba, 2017), cultural activities with elderly people bringing memories and evoking emotions (Gustafsson, 2015) and inmates releasing feelings of anger and frustration through art (Brewster, 2015). Working with theatre enabled women to transfer stories from their lives into the play and that way both express their emotions and train dealing with difficult situations (Boehm & Boehm, 2003). Aesthetic process helps people develop both perceptive and expressive abilities (Boal, 2006). According to Boal, exercising new abilities in artistic activities gives people opportunities to discover who they are and find out who they could become.

Becoming aware of one’s own feelings and practicing different ways of expressing oneself can be seen as one of the first steps in empowerment. Empowerment requires developing new ways of thinking about oneself and defining what one needs from the society (Askheim, 2007). Expressing one’s feelings can, aside from helping in self-discovery, also challenge society’s image about oneself which is another step in the empowerment process (Tenqvist, 2007).

### 6.2.2. Self-confidence

One of the aspects of working with art that showed to be important when working with children and teenagers is art’s effect on self-confidence. Indigenous children in general, and especially girls, have low self-confidence. Alex and Fernando from Global Pediatric Alliance (GPA) talk about girls having even lower self-esteem than boys, and emphasize how the workshops they are doing lead to improvement specifically for girls. They become less shy, have more courage and more confidence. However, it is not only girls who can use improving their self-esteem. All children seem to be very shy in the beginning and participating in the activities changes that. They become more interested, they ask questions and become active participants. As Fernando explains, traditional ways of teaching and working with children can be boring and tiring to them while using art is more creative and makes it possible for children to explore their potential.

Flor from the Secretary of Culture talks about her experience that shows dance and theatre helping children to learn to express themselves and become less shy.

Indira Santos tells about the importance of working with indigenous children's self-confidence. She explains that these children grow up in a system where they are discriminated against from the very beginning (for example schools are in Spanish and their Spanish is usually less good than non-indigenous children's). Indigenous children grow up believing they do not have a lot of options in life, they do not expect something good to happen to them, they do not expect many opportunities in life. The workshops not only influence their self-confidence but show them different options and make them more optimistic. Children start believing there are possibilities for them which they haven't expected before. Indira talks about the importance of Sueniños in giving children soft skills to deal with life, besides hard skills that are included in the usual curriculums (knowledge and profession-related skills). One organisation's name (Xu') means "you can do it" in the indigenous language Tzotzil which gives an example of the importance of this message. Yolanda from Sueniños talked about personal development through arts and art workshops being a way to get away from and overcome the violence from their living contexts. They are developing self-confidence to express themselves and communicate with others. She talked about how participating in exhibitions teaches children to be "responsible but in a free way" (Y. Pérez Hernández, personal communication, 12 April, 2018). Sandra, one of the former Sueniños students, said: "You feel free here, you can do whatever you want" (S. Robledo, personal communication, 12 April, 2018).

Both GPA and Colectivo Xu' work with children in vulnerable areas of the city and mostly in indigenous villages. Edrei from Colectivo Xu' thinks that through taking art and culture to vulnerable and remote areas they try to show and give other possibilities to see the world.

These results are in line with research done with adults involved in art projects where their self-confidence improved as a result of engaging with different art projects. Involvement in a theatre project influenced women's self-esteem leading women to realize that they have capabilities to effect change and they started taking a more active role and showing initiative (Boehm & Boehm, 2013). Rawdon & Moxley (2016) showed that participation in a visual arts project increased homeless people's self-esteem and feeling of self-worth, together with the feeling of accomplishment. Art programs in prisons helped prisoners develop a greater sense of self-worth, competence and accomplishment (Brewster, 2015). The influence of art activities on self-esteem was shown even for elderly people. Gustafsson (2015) showed that participating in art activities resulted in feelings of achievement and trust in one's own strength. My results show that the positive influence of art projects on self-confidence can be found even in children.

Self-confidence is one of the crucial elements of empowerment (Tengqvist, 2007). Empowerment as a process has to include changing the way of thinking about oneself and society which can be

challenging since the society often sees marginalised groups as less worthy, passive and incapable of change. Empowerment processes should help people develop self-confidence and ability to see themselves as worthy and capable. That way they can develop an identity that they are proud of (ibid.).

### 6.2.3. Gender roles

Working with body movement and bodily expressions can be useful in working with gender roles in general but also those related to empowerment factors. Fernando explained that the exercises included in workshops at Global Pediatric Alliance (GPA) include touching between boys and girls in the ways they are not used to which makes the children try out new ways of expressing themselves which leads to them becoming more relaxed. For example, hugging between boys and girls is not common so they do it in their workshops in order for the children to get more used to those ways of expressing and communicating with each other. Alex from GPA talked about exercises where boys do movements with their hips that are usually seen as female ways of moving. In those exercises girls take more confident postures and do movements that are usually considered appropriate for boys. Doing those movements makes girls feel stronger. This is important because by making girls feel stronger and more self-confident, and boys act softer and more attentive, those exercises are changing the usual perceptions of gender roles. Clara from GPA emphasized the importance and the reason why they started working with youth. She explained that when they were working with adults it was very difficult to influence family roles and relationships shaped by gender roles. They wanted to encourage women to take more active roles in their families and communities, but the traditional patriarchal roles were strong and resistant to change.

As mentioned already when talking about self-confidence and body-movements, there are differences between boys and girls. Both Fernando and Alex talked about girls being more shy and less confident and one of the goals of their work is empowering girls. They say that as a result of different workshops and activities, girls become more confident and have more courage. Fernando explained that the workshops also influence boys in a way that they become more attentive and gentle with girls. They have also noticed that the customs in homes and communities are changing. Boys are starting to help in the kitchen and with washing clothes, and they have even noticed less violence.

Carlota from the Chiapas Photography Project talked about how their projects brought together men and women, sometimes husbands and wives and that in these projects they had different roles than in their everyday life. When women are the first ones involved with the photography projects they already know how to use cameras when husbands become involved. That meant that it was women teaching men and this was the exact opposite from how it usually is in their lives.

Gender roles are shaped by socialisation, historical and cultural context (Matsson, 2015) and are therefore not stable and fixed but can be changed. However, even if some of the gender characteristics have been changing over time, some masculinity and femininity norms have been relatively stable

during many years. One of those is self-esteem that has for decades been higher in males than females (Bleidorn et al, 2015) which is in line with high self-esteem being one of the characteristics of masculinity, in most of the countries including Mexico. Masculinity in Mexico is often named and recognized as “machismo” which is a male gender role including characteristics such as self-respect and dignity (Englander, Yañez and Barney, 2012). Female “equivalent” in Mexico is “marianismo” defining humbleness and submissiveness as desirable characteristics for women (ibid.). Cross-cultural research by Bleidorn et al (2015) showed that gender differences in self-esteem in Mexico were higher than the average of other 48 researched countries and that this gender gap in Mexico increases over age. Clara from GPA talked about the importance of influencing girls’ self-esteem in early age. From her experience, working with adult men and women has been difficult because their gender roles are learned from an early age and are not so flexible after becoming part of their personalities and their family roles.

Since self-confidence is one of the important factors in the empowerment process (Askheim, 2007, Tenqvist, 2007), challenging gender roles that negatively influence girls’s and women’s self-confidence is an important factor for the women’s empowerment.

#### 6.2.4. Teamwork, responsibility and solving conflicts

Working with art has shown to give opportunities to improve cooperation between conflicted groups and to teach participants about teamwork. The Chiapas Photography Project (CPP) includes people from groups with different religion, ethnicity and political affiliation. Carlota from CPP explains that by working together they get to know each other and realize that they “live in the same houses, have the same conditions, are the same” (C. Duarte, personal communication, 9 April, 2018). When talking about the Indigenous photo archive, editor and photographer Patricia Gola writes:

At present there are eight Indians who are responsible for the archive (four women, four men), and who in spite of belonging to different ethnic groups and religions - some are Catholic, some Protestant, some displaced or expelled from their communities - work and collaborate in a climate of mutual respect and diversity. (Duarte, 2001, p. 16-17).

These effects of art projects are similar to previous research that showed that involvement in an art project has influenced positively on cohesion within a group (Moxley, 2013).

Considering that a lot of prisoners have had alcohol or drug related problems, we were talking about how they deal with it in the EL77 organisation. José and Andrés from EL77 explained that it is about respecting others, the work they do together as a group and the time they all invest. Because of that they do not tolerate coming to workshops under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The first time it happens prisoners get a warning, and if it happens again they are not allowed to continue being a part of the group. To require something from the people included, there has to also be serious commitment from the organisation’s side. The director who started the project proved to the prisoners that she is serious about the project and that her intentions are long term. This resulted in them taking her

seriously and giving the same in return. Federico from the Secretary of Culture emphasized teaching the organisations that they need to learn to cooperate with each other (within and among organisations) in order to create income for themselves. One of the roles of the Secretary of Culture is to connect the organisations with each other. They help different groups find out about each other, connect and cooperate. Flor from the Secretary explains that for people participating in activities it is important to see the results, the actual events, or resolved issues. This helps because there are conflicts but when they come to an end and people can come to an event, it makes them feel that something has been achieved, and they can participate in it. Guevara-Hernández et al (2012) present the indigenous people's view on empowerment emphasizing dignity and respect for one another, building collective empowerment and unity.

This perspective is in line with some views (Freire, 2000, Tenqvist, 2007) on welfare systems that turn people into receivers of help who have very little or no power at all. Freire advocates for a system, both in the educational and welfare system, where teachers and social workers are equal to users and students which makes it possible to participate in a dialogue. This kind of dialogue includes humility from both sides and the will to think critically and perceive reality as a process with possibilities for transformation as a result of action. Results of this research show that when people cooperate with each other, on the grounds of reciprocity and equal power and rights, they can start to perceive one another differently and focus more on what connects them than on what separates them. An approach that gives people the responsibility for their actions, and requires them to act in order to gain something, makes them agents and not only passive receivers.

#### 6.2.5. Telling their own story and changing stereotypes about themselves

When creating a theatre play prisoners/actors can put their own stories in it. For example, Andrés talks about the play *La Espera* where four actors (all former prisoners) tell their life stories. It is they who are the co-creators of the script and also them acting their own stories. The popularity of those theatre plays has led to media visibility. They do interviews and videos where they talk about themselves and about their work with the theatre company. After every play the audience is welcome to talk to them, and even in the prison where it has a special value. The audience can ask questions and the actors have the opportunity for their voice to be heard. José from EL77 talks about the Q&A session as an opportunity for actors to directly interact with a lot of different people from the outside world.

Chiapas Photography Project (CPP) chooses their projects in cooperation with indigenous people who want to do photography. Participants suggest topics that are important to them and through involvement in the project they are able to tell their own story, not just with photographs, but also in their own words since the publications also include texts to complement the photographs. For example, in the photography book *Mi hermanita Cristina, una niña chamula*, Xunka' López Díaz (2000) wrote her own history, history of her family and social and political factors that influenced that

history. All the texts in the publications are in English, Spanish and indigenous language Tzotzil which makes it possible for the photographers to tell their stories in their own native language which is then translated so it can reach a wider audience.

Carlota from CPP has noticed people's reaction to photo projects and their surprise when they find out that indigenous people took the photographs. This shows that people have certain stereotypes about indigenous people, about what they can do or what they are interested in, and these projects are changing those assumptions. One of the photographers says: "I feel proud to take photographs and would like other people to see what we make. I feel proud that people know my culture." (Duarte, 2001, p. 106).

Mukhuba (2017) found in their analysis of South African women writings that women used art to assert themselves and to change society's stereotypes. Writing helped them articulate their voice and reclaim agency and authority. Sharing their stories can be both healing and a help to deal with social issues and at the same time a fun activity one will join and by doing so become more active (Sonn & Quayle, 2014). Joining organisations and collectives with people in similar situations and backgrounds can encourage individuals to start talking about their experiences (Starrin, 2007)

Marginalized groups are not usually the ones producing culture, they are usually the consumers of culture produced by others (Boal, 2006). Being involved in theatre and other artistic processes can provide opportunities to members of marginalised groups to practice expressing instead of consuming (ibid.). Art gives opportunities for interaction between people that otherwise would not meet (Bourriaud, 1998/2002). That way art can connect different realities and allow for dialogues around different topics from society, history and culture. Art gives possibilities to narrating one's stories and experiences to those who haven't experienced marginalization themselves (Moxley, 2013). Because it evokes emotion, art can be a good way to reach others. Tenqvist (2007) explains that the negative image others have of us makes it more difficult to develop a positive image ourselves, an image that would include seeing ourselves as active individuals who know their own best. Therefore, changing society's image of a group of people can contribute positively to the group's empowerment.

## 7. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this research was to explore the ways marginalised groups can be supported in their empowerment process, and the possible contribution of art projects in that process. Since the study takes the perspective of critical social work believing the true empowerment is difficult to achieve within the state welfare systems, different non-governmental organisations (NGO's) were approached in order to investigate different ways of working with and supporting marginalised groups in their empowerment process.

The study aimed to answer two research questions. The first was to explore the ways marginalised groups can be supported in their empowerment process. The organisations presented in this research are striving towards equal relationships and creating possibilities for their clients to be active members/users who influence the projects they are involved in. Their goal is a relationship where instead of authority, cooperation between equal members of the project is established, with everybody learning from each other and sharing the responsibility that comes with autonomy. The possibilities for influence and achieving change can be motivating factors since they show the individuals the possibilities for them to explore and affect their environment. The organisations' objective is to be self-sufficient and most of them find alternatives to get funding in a way that does not condition their working process which leaves them, and consequently their users, more freedom and possibilities. Some of the organisations support the people involved in the projects by helping them with work opportunities within the organisations and by creating visibility which leads them to finding other work possibilities outside the organisations. Healy (2014), Freire (1970/2000) and Karlsson & Börjeson (2011) all talk about the contradictions of the welfare system. Welfare system is a state system, with an imbalance of the power between the providers and user, with the providers being the ones defining the situation and problem and giving solutions which can lead to clients assuming passive roles. All these factors are in a process of changing with welfare systems and social workers taking on more equal roles and becoming aware of their position. Nevertheless, the criticized characteristics still shape the welfare system which makes the non-governmental organisations the place where the users can turn to find another kind of support, the one that will contribute to their empowerment in different ways.

The second research question aimed to explore the ways art activities can contribute to the empowerment of the people involved in these activities. The focus of the research were marginalised groups, such as prisoners and indigenous children and adults, who are involved with art projects organised by non-governmental organisations. From the interviews with the organisations' employees, several topics and effects that art projects had on the participants emerged and were recognised as some of the central components of the empowerment process. These factors are self-confidence, pride, changing ways of thinking about oneself and society, expressing one's feelings and changing the

society's perceptions by telling about one's own experiences and history (Askheim, 2007; Tenqvist, 2007). Research results implicate that art projects can contribute to the empowerment process because they can influence those factors that are central elements of the empowerment process. Art projects can help people become more aware of, deal with and express their own feelings, instead of repressing oneself or expressing feelings in destructive ways. Higher self-confidence, courage to participate in activities and exploring their potential are also consequences of involvement in art activities that can help individuals find ways to fight against the discrimination and obstacles they face when dealing with society. Self-confidence has been mentioned also in the context of gender roles, since in the experience of the respondents, girls and women have lower self-confidence. A way of improving it can be to work with art activities designed specifically to work with gender roles encouraging girls and women to take on more active attitudes and try out new activities that will make them feel competent and stronger. A way to change stereotypes about themselves can be by telling their own stories and being involved in the whole process of projects' production which were the possibilities that some of the organisations provided. This process also gives room for communication with other society members, since art is an activity that encourages relationships with others, connecting different realities and opening for interactions between different groups of people (Bourriaud, 1998/2002).

Working together on projects taught the participants about teamwork and has improved cooperation between different groups which is another important factor for the empowerment process. Joining organisations and working together with others can make individuals stronger and encourage them to start speaking up about their experiences of marginalisation (Starrin, 2007). Fighting against discrimination collectively can achieve more than the individual actions and can therefore change the society more effectively. According to Gramsci (1971, referred in Mattsson, 2015) the capitalist, hegemonic and superior society has presented their way of interpreting reality as natural and true which led to underprivileged groups accepting others' interpretations of their own reality and that way accepting their subordinate position. Freire (1970/2000) emphasises that the changes in educational and welfare systems that would imply dialogue between those in power and the oppressed, would make it possible for the marginalised to express their views and become active participants in the society. Listening to subordinate voices and giving them legitimacy has a potential to change the power relations in the society and challenge the self-proclaimed truths of the privileged. For social work to fully understand and support the marginalised groups, it needs to give them autonomy over their own lives and possibilities for change. I believe that the results and perspectives explained in this study can be useful and are needed as a complement and an inspiration to the social welfare system.

When reviewing the results of this research there are two things to have in mind. One is the fact that I have looked at the effects of art projects only in the context of NGOs. Therefore my results can not be generalized on art projects in general because it is impossible to conclude, only on account of



this research, how much of the influence on the participants was because of the art nature of the projects, how much could be an effect of project involvement, no matter the type of activity, and finally how much because of the NGO's way of working and relationships they have with their clients.

Another factor is having only NGO employees as respondents. I have chosen to give the NGOs' staff point of view being aware that the main perspective and the voices that should be listened to are those of the marginalised people themselves. Since I had limited resources in terms of money, time and connections, I had to adjust to the circumstances and limit myself to only one perspective, the one available to me. Therefore the results and conclusions of this research have to be understood taking into account that it is only the perspective of the people employed by the NGOs. Not only that they are not the users themselves and therefore are speaking only of what they perceive that the contribution of art projects on other people are, but they are more likely to speak positively about the effects and results of their own work. Taking that into account, the results should be interpreted as possibly embellished and more positive than the reality. On the other hand, the respondents coming from different NGOs have talked about similar experiences so we can assume that even if their perspective is influenced by the desire to give a positive image of the work of the organisation, the results still have a certain value since various sources have given similar account of the effects of art projects on their participants. Nevertheless, the social reality described by the organisation's staff may differ from the social reality of the organisations' clients which is why a research looking into their perspective would be the next step in order to get the whole picture of the possible contributions of art projects on empowerment of the people involved.

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## Appendix

- Tell me about the organisation you work for. What are your projects? Who are your users?  
How do you get funding?
- What do you do in the organisation?
- Tell me about the art projects that you organise. What kind of activities are organised? Who are the projects for – who are the participants?
- How would you describe the participants role or involvement in the project?
- Have you noticed any changes that you relate to participants' involvement in the projects?
- How would you describe working with art projects? Are there characteristics of art projects that differentiates them from other type of projects? If yes, can you describe them?