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Leaving the Bubble: Understanding the Transition to Independent Living for  
Honduran Women in Government Care

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
Requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Latin American and Iberian Studies

by

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June 2016

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May 2016

Leaving the Bubble: Understanding the Transition to  
Independence for Honduran Women under Government Care

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by

Kirstin L. Brown

## ABSTRACT

### Leaving the Bubble: Understanding the Transition to Independence for Honduran Women under Government Care

by

Kirstin L. Brown

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of living in and transitioning from a group home in Honduras for eighteen and nineteen year old women. From June to August 2015, I gathered data through semi-structured interviews on the lived experiences of eight women from their time in a group home and through to the first year of their transitions. Using a grounded-theory approach I analyzed the discursive themes that emerged in the conversations and explored the connections made by the participants on each theme. Analysis of the women's discussion about their lives in the group home revealed that they found the experience to be highly structured and routine. Apparently small shifts in the daily routine, discipline and education of the home impacted multiple aspects of their lives, and had a significant effect on their day-to-day experience in the home. The participants' discussion of their transition suggested that the social and economic isolation of the group home made the

transition to independent living difficult. They had little experience with basic skills like transportation and money management. The women's future goals revealed a strong value for higher education, self-sufficiency, and the ability to support loved ones.

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## **I. Introduction, Literature Review and Methodology**

Honduran children and adolescents are migrating by the thousands to the United States to escape poverty, violence and unemployment.<sup>1</sup> In the midst of the migration crisis, IHNFA, the nation's government institute for children and family, was completely disbanded. Honduras is now building its new institute for children from the ground up as the government reformats its approach to child welfare. During this process of reconstruction, it is valuable to investigate the current situation of children and adolescents in the country. My study examines the lived experiences of some of the most vulnerable children and adolescents in Honduras, those without family support who rely wholly on the government for their care. In a nation facing severe poverty and unemployment, the children who are placed in government care are turned out of care at eighteen. The young adults have few options for housing and livelihood other than the street, and only a handful of private group homes offer any kind of transition programs, or extended stay, to help them adapt to independent life, earn an education and find employment.

My research studies the transition from group homes to independent living for young women in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. I interviewed eight women who all transitioned from the same group home over the course of a year. By analyzing participants' discussions and themes that emerged from the interviews, I offer a better understanding of the lives of young people who chose to remain in

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<sup>1</sup> "Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children", U.S. Customs and Border

Honduras. I also hope the perspectives of the participants will further inform private group homes of the challenges facing young people who live in and are launched from government care.

In chapter one of the study, I present background information on Honduras, its child welfare department, and the government care system, beginning from when it receives children into care, through to their life in group homes. No qualitative studies have been conducted on the transition to independent living in Honduras. Chapter one, therefore, is a literature review of qualitative studies in the United States that examine youth transitioning from the US foster care system. Additionally I will describe the methodology used to conduct the study. Chapter two provides the results of the interviews with the participants based on the three guiding topics of the interviews: experience in a group home, experience transitioning to independent living, and goals for their futures. In the third and final chapter, I will discuss the findings of my study and offer recommendations to Honduran group homes to better facilitate the transition.

### **A. United States Foster Care Transition**

Little work has been done to investigate the lived experiences of children and adolescents transitioning out of group homes in Honduras. I draw on qualitative research that has been conducted in the United States to look at the youth transition from the foster care system to emancipation and independent living from the perspective of foster care youth. Many of the studies found that youth expressed that their life skills were underdeveloped, thus making the transition

to independent living challenging. One scholar found that former foster care youth more often expressed what she calls a “learned helplessness” than youth who were not in the system.<sup>2</sup> They display a lack of motivation and an apparent belief that their actions did not affect their futures. The undeveloped sense of efficacy is connected to a lack of control that the youth experienced over the actions and outcomes during their lives in the system.<sup>3</sup>

Due to the control exerted over their lives, former foster care youth believed that they did not have the opportunity to learn basic life skills like personal care and purchasing.<sup>4</sup> Both youth and caseworkers agreed that in foster care, youths’ lives were largely determined for them.<sup>5</sup> Policies restricted foster parents from allowing youth in care to have the amount of freedom that a teenager outside of the system would have. While foster care youth are allowed less opportunity to practice life skills and gain lived experiences, they are under more scrutiny than most adolescents by foster parents, caseworkers, judges and other authorities involved in their lives. After emancipation, youth were expected to determine their lives without prior experience of making decisions on their own or responding to failure. Youth expressed that they had grown accustomed to

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Gomez, “Understanding Emerging Adulthood from the Perspective of those Transitioning from Foster Care and Those Experiencing Homelessness” (dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2012), 115.

<sup>3</sup> Gomez, “Understanding Emerging Adulthood”, 143.

<sup>4</sup> Mike Stein, “Resilience and Young People Leaving Care: Overcoming the odds” (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Geenen and Laurie E. Powers, “The Experiences of Youth in Foster Care during their Transition into Adulthood”, *Children and Youth Services Review 29*, (2007). *Services Review 29* (2007): 1090-1095

constant support in the foster care system.<sup>6</sup> They were shocked to suddenly receive no outside support once they had left.

The lack of experience foster care youth had with life skills led many to be underprepared for independent living. Former foster care youth stated they have a limited understanding of how life worked outside of the system.<sup>7</sup> Some had developed unrealistic expectations of major costs like higher education and housing.<sup>8</sup> They were also unaware of financial support and benefits that were available to them. Multiple studies found that the strictly controlled lives of youth in foster care left them disconnected from the outside world and unable to develop basic independent living skills such as managing money, purchasing food, securing housing and finding employment.<sup>9</sup> Youth who transitioned abruptly were less prepared for the challenges of independent living than those who had remained in the foster care system to receive further assistance. Those who had gone through programs to learn independent living skills found that “hard skills” like money management had been emphasized over soft skills like decision making and communicating.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gomez, “Understanding Emerging Adulthood”, 121

<sup>7</sup> Gomez, “Understanding Emerging Adulthood”, 119

<sup>8</sup> Osarumen Rachel Eriamiatoe, “Independent Living Services and the Educational Motivation of Foster Youth” (dissertation, Tennessee State University, 2011), 110

<sup>9</sup> Gomez “Understanding Emerging Adulthood”, 122

Miranda Cunningham and Marcelo Diversi, “Aging out: Youths’ perspectives on foster care and the transition to independence”, *Qualitative Social Work* 12, no. 5 (2012) 591-592

A number of studies found that strong relationships with foster parents, families, or other authority figures could play a positive role in the transition from foster care to independent living. When interviewed, former foster care youth expressed a need for relationships over financial help as their main source of support.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, youth who went through independent living programs later demonstrated more of a connection with the people who had taught them than the lessons they had learned in the program.<sup>12</sup> Some foster care youth were able to develop independent living skills and education while living with foster parents who gave them freedom to strengthen the skills they would need in the future.<sup>13</sup> One scholar found that a stable relationship with a parent figure was particularly valuable for developing resilience in foster care youth.<sup>14</sup> A consistent relationship provided youth with secure support from which they could branch out and experience life more confidently. Aside from continuity and security, caring relationships could help youth develop a sense of self worth.<sup>15</sup> Supportive relationships with foster parents in particular provided youth with an opportunity to heal from past hurts.<sup>16</sup> Youth valued relationships with foster

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<sup>11</sup> Gomez “Understanding Emerging Adulthood”, 130.

<sup>12</sup> Alfreda Iglehart and Rosina Becerra, “Hispanic and African American Youth: Life after Foster Care Emancipation”, *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 11, (2002), 83.

<sup>13</sup> Eriamiatoe, “Independent Living Services”, 89.

<sup>14</sup> Stein, “Resilience and Young People Leaving Care”, 2-8.

<sup>15</sup> Geenen and Powers, “Tomorrow is another problem”, 1092.

<sup>16</sup> Julie Griffin, “Growing up in Foster Care: A Qualitative Study of the Relational Worlds of Foster Youth” (dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2004), 149, 172.

parents who listened to them and gave them a sense of belonging, acceptance and value.

### **B. Honduras and its Setting for Children**

In caring for its children and adolescents, the Honduran government is in a uniquely precarious situation. Its status as the most violent peacetime nation in the world has created a space of extreme vulnerability for children.<sup>17</sup> Most children in Honduras are at risk of violence whether it be domestic, gang related or violence on the streets. Many have been orphaned as victims of this violence and others try to escape their circumstances by living on the streets or migrating to another country. The Honduran government responded in 1996 with a national Código de la Niñez y La Adolescencia as well as the creation of a government department for families and children designed to protect and care for children in need of government intervention. In this chapter I provide information on the current condition of the nation of Honduras, particularly as a setting for children and adolescents. I will then explain the Honduran process of response to children in need of government intervention. Finally, I will discuss the group homes in which children are placed by the Honduran government and some of the issues they face that could later affect their transition to independent living as young adults.

#### ***1. The Backdrop of Honduras***

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<sup>17</sup> Karen Musalo, et al, editor. *Childhood and Migration in Central and North America: Causes, Policies, Practices and Challenges*. (San Francisco: UC Hastings, 2015).



Honduras is a relatively small nation fixed in the middle of the isthmus that makes up Central America. For the past two centuries, the country has dealt with a variety of conflicts from its separation from Spain in 1821 to war with El Salvador in 1969. Most recently, Honduras had to respond to the devastation of hurricane Mitch in 1998 and a 2009 military coup d'état. The hardships to the nation's political and economic stability in addition to a new rise in the presence of criminal gangs, has risen the nation to its position as the most violent country in the world, outside of war zones.<sup>18</sup>

Honduras's homicide rate per capita is extremely high. In the past few years, 79 murders occurred per 100,000 people a year.<sup>19</sup> The most affected regions were the urban spaces of Francisco Morazán, which hosts the country's capital

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<sup>18</sup> Musalo et al., *Childhood and Migration in Central and North America*.

<sup>19</sup> Musalo et al., *Childhood and Migration in Central and North America*.

Tegucigalpa, and its second largest city San Pedro Sula, also known as the murder capital of the world. The national vulnerability is further frustrated by Honduras's economic underdevelopment. According to the United Nation's Conventions on the Rights of Children, in 2006, 64% of Honduran households live in poverty and 45% live in extreme poverty with an income equivalent of US \$40 a month or less.<sup>20</sup>

Of the 8,598,561-person population of Honduras, 49.7% are under eighteen years of age. That is, half of the population in Honduras consists of minors. The children and adolescents are at risk of being threatened directly or indirectly by the violence of the nation. Over 200,000 Honduran children have been orphaned, orphaned children being defined as those who have physically lost one or both parents.<sup>21</sup> Of the children whose fathers have died, 40.7% lost their fathers to homicide. The second highest cause of death was accidents. In mothers, the most common cause of death fell into the "other" or miscellaneous category, the second most common being cancer at 31.7% and the third homicide at 8.9%. In addition, young people themselves face the first-hand consequences of violence. In 2014, 767 children and adolescents under the age of 23 were killed via homicide.<sup>22</sup>

Children are particularly vulnerable to the operations of criminal gangs. Gangs, like Mara Salvatrucha and the 18<sup>th</sup> Street Gang, use threats, stalking, and acts

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<sup>20</sup> Honduras Committee on the Rights of the Child. Convention on the Rights of the Child. GE.06-45872. (2006), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Honduras Instituto Nacional de Estadística.

<sup>22</sup> "Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children".



of physical violence against children to force and influence their families.<sup>23</sup> Within their own homes and families, many Honduran children are no safer. High rates of domestic violence and sexual abuse pervade the country. The year 2014 saw 1,886 cases of rape. Tegucigalpa alone received 1,155 complaints of domestic violence against children.



Many Honduran children take an active stance against the threat of violence by living on the streets or attempting to migrate. Six thousand children live on the streets.<sup>24</sup> The vast majority of the children have families and many are still in contact with their families. However, due to some threat of ill treatment, the children have opted to leave home. Most beg or steal to survive. Some resort to

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<sup>23</sup> Musalo et al., *Childhood and Migration in Central and North America*.

<sup>24</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, 26.

prostitution.<sup>25</sup> Eighty percent of children living on the streets have been assaulted either by strangers or by the police.

More recently, children running away from abuse have chosen to migrate on their own in place of remaining in the country. Between 2009 and 2013, 31,206 Honduran children were caught trying to cross the United States border from México.<sup>26</sup> More are believed to have made it through to the United States or died somewhere between the US and Honduran borders.<sup>27</sup> Similarly to children on the street, the most common reason for migrating was to escape violence. A second reason was to reunite with families who had attempted to migrate. During my work in Honduran group homes, I overheard children and adolescents discuss the prospect of “going wet”<sup>28</sup> or migrating to the United States as if it was a simple, everyday decision. The children who had a parent the US spoke as if they could easily reunite even though none had spoken to their migrated parents since they left. By risking their lives to migrate, Honduran children in large numbers have unknowingly positioned themselves at the center of an international migration policy debate. By doing so they have highlighted the dangerous circumstances of their sending country and the

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<sup>25</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, 27.

<sup>26</sup> “Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children”.

<sup>27</sup> “Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children”.

<sup>28</sup> The phrase “going wet” originally referred to crossing into the United States on the US-Mexico border by swimming across the Rio Grande. From its use amongst children in Honduras, I gather that the phrase has been appropriated into common discussion about migrating to the US across the US-Mexico border.

deprivation of human rights that thousands of children face in the violence of their nation.

## *2. Government Response and the Orphanage System*



**Image 1 City of Tegucigalpa**

Articles 61, 139, 140, and 157 of the 1996 Honduran Código de la Niñez address the government role in the lives of orphaned and at-risk children. The code states that children without legal representation of a parent or guardian are considered at social risk and have the right to receive social services from the government. The Public Ministry then represents the children and their estates. Prior to the fall of 2014, the Honduran Institute of Childhood and Family (IHNFA) dealt with concerns of children in the country. IHNFA authorized and enacted preventative and protective measures when children were found to be

at-risk. Though Honduras's laws for the protection of children are in place, IHNFA was considered to be inadequate in enforcing Honduran laws for the rights of children and in responding to the violation of those rights.<sup>29</sup> The government department was underfunded and mismanaged. It was shut down along with the state orphanage Casitas Kennedy in Tegucigalpa. In January of 2015, the Honduran government launched DINAF, the Department of Childhood, Adolescence, and Family, the replacement branch of child and family services. Over the next year, the new department made many changes in its operations. DINAF is currently in its beginning stages in deciding how child and family services will now be run in Honduras.

Between May and September of 2015, I had the opportunity to interview five administrators of group homes in the Tegucigalpa area. From the interviews, I was able glean more information on the national process of care for orphaned or at risk children and adolescents during the transition from IHNFA over to DINAF. According to Ileana Molina, a social worker for a group home, there are multiple ways in which a child can become a ward of the state and be placed in an orphanage or foster home.<sup>30</sup> The police or the family court may receive a call from a witness who testifies that a child has been abused. They notify the *fiscalía* who are legal representatives of the state. The *fiscalía* would then conduct an inspection of the home to verify the testimony of abuse. Once verified,

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<sup>29</sup> Musalo et al., *Childhood and Migration in Central and North America*.

<sup>30</sup> Ileana Molina, interview by Kirstin Brown, May 18, 2015, transcript.

they would issue a warrant authorizing that the child is taken from the home. Previously, the child would then be sent to IHNFA who would be responsible for him/her. Under IHNFA, children in the Francisco Morazán region or surrounding areas were placed in Casitas Kennedy, the state run orphanage located in Tegucigalpa. Children could remain for a short period or for a number of years depending on whether or not better circumstances could be found for them.

Under the new system, private group homes now receive children directly from DINAF, which must place children in a private home within 72 hours after they come into state custody.<sup>31</sup> The department contacts a group home if they have a case that would be a good fit for that facility. Many private group homes have a particular role that they play in the system by only or mostly accepting children of a specific age range, gender, or circumstance. Of the homes I spoke with, one took in children under seven years old, or if they were in sibling groups, and kept them until they were ready to move out at eighteen. Another specialized in adolescent girls, and another worked with special needs children and young mothers pregnant by rape or incest.

Privately run homes undergo a yearly supervision by the government to make sure that the home is adhering to government standards.<sup>32</sup> Although they are the preferred option, many of the homes considered to be higher quality have

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<sup>31</sup>Ileana Molina.

<sup>32</sup> Ileana Molina.

a limit on the number of children they can take. If homes are at capacity, DINAF will place children in one of a few homes that are government subsidized and cannot refuse a child - like Casa Alianza in Tegucigalpa.<sup>33</sup> Molina and the four group home directors had all had cases in which the *fiscalía* made the decision to bypass sending a child through DINAF and placed the child directly into a home. One instance would be what the social worker referred to as an “emotional” or special case; the *fiscalía* agent would call a private home directly so that a particular child will not be placed in one of the lower quality homes.

Children in Honduras are placed in government care because they have experienced abandonment or abuse. Molina stated that some of the infants in the system were left at the hospital after they were delivered.<sup>34</sup> In Tegucigalpa, for example, a pregnant mother might go to Hospital Escuela, an inexpensive teaching hospital, with the intention of leaving her baby when she delivers. Mothers can give false names and ID numbers so they cannot be tracked down. Abandoned children then are handed over to DINAF. Some of these children are placed with families in foster care instead of homes because they have a better chance of being adopted. DINAF also contacts group homes with cases of children who have been abused or neglected.

When I spoke to Ron and Christy Langejans, mentor parents of a group home for children outside of Tegucigalpa, they had recently received an infant whose

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<sup>33</sup> Ileana Molina.

<sup>34</sup> Ileana Molina.

mother was addicted to huffing glue.<sup>35</sup> The couple believed that the mother held the baby on the street while she huffed so that she could evoke more sympathy from passersby when she begged for money. When the infant came to them she was covered in glue and was unresponsive. Over the next few days she began to liven up. The home has had other cases of receiving children with broken limbs and children experiencing malnutrition. According to Michael Perry, the director of a home for adolescents, adolescents entering into the system for the first time are usually removed because of an abusive situation.<sup>36</sup> It is also likely that adolescents have experienced abuse if they have been in government care or on the streets for a number of years.

There are children in Honduras who come into the system directly from the streets. The police are authorized to take into custody any children they find on the streets without adult supervision.<sup>37</sup> They are then put into Casitas Kennedy. For children and adolescents coming from the street, it very likely that they will run away in the first two nights.<sup>38</sup> Older children in particular who have been on the street or in government care for a long time are accustomed to being on their own without rules or supervision. Langejans stated that their group home only takes in younger children for because of the risk that teenagers would run

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<sup>35</sup> Ron and Christy Langejans, interview by Kirstin Brown, July 18, 2015, transcript.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Perry, interview by Kirstin Brown, July 14, 2015, transcript.

<sup>37</sup> Ileana Molina.

<sup>38</sup> Ileana Molina.

away.<sup>39</sup> Their facilities are set up with multiple smaller homes where 8-10 children live in more like families, with a mentor couple and three other caretakers. The open property, in a rural area, and without any barrier walls,



**Image 2: A teenaged girl in a group home. The girl pictured was not a part of my study.**

makes it difficult to house adolescents who are likely to leave a group home. The home that specializes in adolescents goes through an interview process with youth who are candidates for the home to search specifically for those who demonstrate that they are motivated to move forward in life or to change their behavior if they had problems in the past.<sup>40</sup>

Life in the group homes is highly structured and routine. Outside of Casitas Kennedy, which no longer operates, the group homes that I observed during my

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<sup>39</sup> Ron and Christy Langejans.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Perry.



time living in Honduras, or whose directors I interviewed later, were all private homes with religious affiliations that had a reputation of being nicer quality homes.<sup>41</sup> These group homes typically house fewer children in an effort to maintain a family feel. They hire a small staff of caretakers, sometimes called *tías* or aunts. They also have volunteer or missionary staff from the United States. Directors Gracie Murphee and Michael Perry also mentioned hiring psychiatrists or counselors to meet with the children. Many of the homes require the older children and adolescents to be responsible for daily chores like cleaning and cooking. One exception was the home for young women with babies. According to the home's director Gracie Murphree, they hired workers to maintain the home so that the women could focus on their schoolwork and have time to care for their babies.<sup>42</sup>

In the smaller, private homes the children are given the opportunity to receive an education. Some facilities have schools onsite, and others take their children and youth to local schools. Langejans shared that their home offers students a bilingual education in English and Spanish, which can be valuable when they are pursuing jobs after they graduate.<sup>43</sup> The home also provides vocational training and work experience, which is mainly comprised of chores around the property, to teach their older children and adolescents money

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<sup>41</sup> My understanding of their reputation is based on the directors' reports of their own group home and their thoughts on the each other's group homes.

<sup>42</sup> Gracie Murphree, interview by Kirstin Brown, September 6, 2015, transcript.

<sup>43</sup> Ron and Christy Langejans.

management skills. The children put a portion of the money they earn in a savings account that they have access to when they graduate from the home.

When adolescents age out of government care, they have few options or resources to help them with the transition to independent living. Previously under IHNFA, when boys reached the age of 13, they were removed from the public homes and placed in separate homes specifically for adolescent boys.<sup>44</sup> The transition into Tegucigalpa's home for older boys could be a shock for young boys because many of the young men there had been involved in criminal activity. According to Molina, it functioned more like a jail than a home. Girls remained in the public homes and were turned out when they reached eighteen. Very few private homes in the country have a transition program. Molina believes that most of the young men and women would rather have their freedom at eighteen than go into another program.

Coming out of an orphanage, there are few options for youth without assistance other than living on the street. Director Michael Perry informed me that the youth who do go on to college do not have the option of living on the university's campus like in the United States. The only shelters in Tegucigalpa are drug rehabilitation shelters and women's shelters, which do not give residents the option of coming and going as they please.<sup>45</sup> A few private homes chose to facilitate the transition to independent living and have transition

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<sup>44</sup> Ileana Molina.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Perry.

houses onsite or in the city where youth can stay for free or for a low rent fee after they turn eighteen. The transition homes provide them with stable housing while they begin working and continuing their education. One of the group homes hires a couple specifically to run their transition home. They teach the youth survival skills for living in the city like transportation, shopping and safety.<sup>46</sup>

### **C. Methodology**

In my study, two types of qualitative methods were used to understand the participants' lived experiences and perspectives. The two methods were focus groups and individual interviews. The focus groups were conducted as preliminary research to gather foundational data that is relevant to and given by the participants. In the second phase of the interviews, the information gathered was then explored with the participants on an individual basis to collect more specific and in-depth data on themes that arose in the first interviews. The semi-structured format of both interview phases created an open environment in which participants were free to discuss accounts of their own lived experiences and their views on a given topic. In this study the attitudes explored were the perspectives of young women on their transition from a group home to independent living.

In 2013-2014, I met and got to know the participants of this study while I volunteered in the group in which they lived in the Tegucigalpa area. I lived in

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<sup>46</sup> Ron and Christy Langejans.

the group home with the girls for one year and worked five days a week as counselor. My duties were to supervise the girls of the home in their daily routine. During that year, a few of the participants of my study were preparing for their transitions to independent living by applying to colleges or looking for employment. Three women left the home in that time to work, attend school, or live with family. I moved back to the United State in the summer of 2014. By January of 2015, twelve women had begun transitioning to independent living. I kept in touch with the women while I was back in the United States beginning my Master's program. I visited Honduras twice during the first year for a week at a time, once in the fall and once in the spring.

Although my initial role in the home was not that of a researcher, I was able to use my time in Honduras as participant observation and preliminary research. The year allowed me to gain rapport with the participants, to make connections with various group homes in Honduras, and to gain a familiarity with the culture and the country. In the summer of 2015, I returned to Honduras to conduct interviews with the women who had transitioned. Eight of the twelve women were still living in or near Tegucigalpa and were able to participate.

Each of the girls in the home had a complex background that resulted in their placement in government care. For the most part, the participants of the study were initially placed in government care from a combination of adverse circumstances. Four of the participants had experienced abuse in the home, five had experienced abandonment by family members, and two had experienced

death of a family member. One of the women was removed from her home because her family was in danger. Three of the participants had been in various group homes throughout their childhood. They were placed in the adolescent home to have an opportunity to further their education before they turned eighteen. The other five women entered government care later in their adolescence and were directly placed into the adolescent home.

In the study, I refer to the women with pseudonyms. The participants initially all chose their own pseudonyms. I later changed three of the names that were either shared with people outside of the focus groups or were too similar to an actual name of one of the participants.

Focus Group 1		Focus Group 2	
Margara	19	Amanda	18
Christina	18	Amber	19
Anita	19	Zoe	19
Camila	18	Mia	18

For the first phase of the interviews, the participants were organized into two focus groups of four women each. A focus group is understood to be a group interview for which a small collection of participants, usually six to twelve, is

recruited.<sup>47</sup> The objective of a focus group is to gather information about a population's attitudes or the motivations behind their actions and opinions. The utilization of the method is particularly valuable for the open dialogue that it promotes. Focus groups develop a secure group space that encourages a conversation amongst peers.

Using a semi-structured interview approach, I guided the discussion through three pre-determined topics: their experience in the group home, their experience transitioning to independent living and their goals for the future. The three topics were chosen to gain the perspective of the women on their past in the group home and their year of transition and to look at the ways that the women perceived the possible outcome of present lives.

### Guiding Topics of the Interview

1. The women's experience in the group home
2. Their experience transitioning to independent living
3. Their goals for the future

The information that the participants shared in the focus groups laid down the foundation for the second phase of individual interviews. After the focus

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<sup>47</sup> Russel Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*. (Alta Mira Press: Oxford, 2006): 233.

groups interviews, I interviewed seven of the eight participants individually.<sup>48</sup> If they were comfortable doing so, the participants were able to give more detailed accounts of their time in the group home and their time of transition to independence. The second phase of individual interviews gave the participants the opportunity to explain their perspectives on topics that they had discussed in the focus groups without being in the presence of their peers. The openness of the semi-structured format in the individual interviews also allowed me to tailor each interview to the participant. The topical guidelines of the interviews remained the same: their experience in the group home, their experience transitioning to independent living and their goals for the future. More specific questions were asked in each interview to expound on the particular experiences and perspectives of each participant.

In the next stage of the study, I used a grounded-theory approach to analyze the data gathered from the interviews. After the two group interviews and seven individual interviews, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed in preparation for analysis. In a grounded-theory approach, researchers code the data to find reoccurring themes that emerged.<sup>49</sup> By discovering themes from the data, grounded-theory centers the analysis on the “reality’ of the data”.<sup>50</sup> The approach thereby allows ethnographers to keep the experiences of their

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<sup>48</sup> One of the participants was starting a new work/education schedule, and we could not find a time to meet for the individual interview without imposing on her commitments.

<sup>49</sup> Russel Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 492.

<sup>50</sup> Julie Griffin, “Growing up in Foster Care,” 60.

participants central to the analysis. I organized the recurring themes within the three topics that had guided the interviews: the women's experience in the group home, their experience transitioning out of the group home, and their plans for the future. I then analyzed the statements that the participants made about the themes to explore the links that gave insight into the women's perception of each of the topics.

## **II. Results**

In this chapter I will discuss and analyze the data gathered from the focus groups and individual interviews on the participants' perspectives of their experience in the group home, their experience transitioning to independent living and on their goals for the future.

### **A. Group Home Experience**

The first topic discussed in the interviews was the experience of living in a group home. In both of the group interviews, I broached the topic broadly then asked the young women to tell me about their daily lives in the house in order to prompt discussion. From there, the participants' conversation touched on various aspects of the living in the house, from the detailed routines to a broader analyses of how, in their opinions, the house could be improved. In the individual interviews, the women expounded on different aspects of the home that they discussed in the group interviews. Across the board, three themes repeatedly surfaced and each of the themes was notably discussed through a discourse of transition. The three themes were:



1. Routine
2. Discipline
3. Education

The women organized their discussion of each of the topics into *pasos* or different stages that occurred when changes were implemented in home by the administration. They described the changes in their routine, discipline and education and reflected on the effects of the changes on their individual lives and on the dynamics of home.

### ***1. Routines***

In discussing the women's daily lives in the group home, the conversation quickly turned to their routines and the chores for which they were responsible in the home. The participants organized the discussion into the three different stages in which the management and expectation of their routine changed. Their lives in the group home were highly structured with a strict schedule of cleaning, cooking, and schoolwork. According to Margara, the routine showed little variation day-by-day and week-by-week other than a couple of outings on the weekend. She explained that even the weekend shifts in schedule were not very significant:

Margara: Creo que el único día que cambiaba la rutina era sábado y el domingo. El sábado con [deportes] que casimente era lo mismo porque lo sábado era [deportes], después regresábamos, aseo general, después, creo que hacer tareas, hacer cena.

Margara: I believe the only day that the routine changed was Saturday and Sunday. Saturday with [sports] that was almost the same because on

Saturday sports, then we returned, general cleaning, after I think homework and make dinner.

Margara and the other women gave similar lists of their repetitive schedule. In any given day in the home they woke up, cleaned, made a meal, went to school, made a meal, cleaned, and worked on their homework. With the strict regularity of their schedule, the young women starkly noted the changes that occurred in their all aspects of their lives when their routine and responsibilities were changed or restructured.

The girls who had lived in the home the longest remembered the initial stage when their chores and the weight of routine were lighter.

Anita: Cuando se inició [la Casa] las responsabilidades eran súper diferentes. Bueno, cuando comenzó, no había un horario específico para cada chica. Cada quien hacía su aseo porque lo deseaba hacer.

Anita: When the home was started the responsibilities were super different. Well, when it began, there wasn't a specific schedule for each girl. Each one did her cleaning because she should do it.

Anita and a couple of her friends who were also in the group home at that time spoke fondly of the first routine when they all preformed their own chores simply because they needed to be done. By stressing that each girl did her chores because she should, without the threat of castigation or peer pressure, the women spoke positively about a period when they had some agency and control over their routine. They could choose when to clean because they understood that they were responsible for the work that had to be done.

Soon after the first change came about, the structure of the routine was altered with the addition of a schedule that appointed a weekly task to each girl and a system of discipline – which usually delegated further cleaning tasks as a punishment - that was evoked by the *consejeras* or counselor when a chore was done poorly or not at all.

The women discussed certain negative impacts that the transition of routines had on their lives. Anita and Christina observed an adverse effect on the girls' motivation to work:

Anita: ... No todos lo tomaron muy bien. Lo que hacían ya por voluntad ya no hacían por voluntad sino por obligación.

Christina: Al principio como había dicho Anita, todo era bien, por nuestra propia voluntad y hacer las cosas como a la fuerza no era muy bien.

Anita: Not everyone took it very well. What they had done by their own will now they didn't do it by will but by obligation.

Christina: At the beginning like Anita said, everything was fine, by our own will and to do things by force was not very good.

The routine changed to rigorous responsibilities and a tight schedule, and the girls lost a level of agency in performing their work. They could no longer choose when and how to execute their chores. Instead, the *consejeras* managed the girls' schedule and tasks constantly. Amber generally described the new routine in a group interview.

Amber: Nosotros levantamos a las cuatro de la mañana y nos acostamos a las diez de la noche. En estos días, aseamos, hicimos el desayuno para nosotras mismas, continua en la casa, vamos a la escuela en la casa.

Amber: We got up at four in the morning and went to bed at ten at night. In those days, we cleaned, made breakfast for ourselves, stayed in the house – we went to school in the house.

Later in her individual interview, I asked Amber why they had to wake up so early, Amber explained:

Amber: Porque nos tocaba supuestamente. Es que eran bien exigentes con el aseo. Entonces al diario estábamos aseando nuestros cuartos, la sala, la cocina, hacer la comida – nos tocaba hacerla. Y todo eso por eso. Y como habían chicas que hacían todo a paso de tortuga todo nos caía. Por eso era.

Amber: Because it was our job supposedly. It's that they were very strict with the cleaning. So daily we were cleaning our rooms, the living room, the kitchen, make the food – it was our job to do it. And all of that for that. And since there were girls that did everything at a turtle's pace everything fell on us. That's why.

The general sense of the second stage from all of the women was that their chores and routine had become arduous. Waking up early to a full schedule and going to bed late was tiring and stressful. The change in the women's relationship to their responsibilities also affected their relationships with each other. In following the tight schedule, one girl's delay in getting ready or doing the first part of a chore, like sweeping the floor before someone else mopped, could have impacted the schedule for the rest of the girls who all risked getting in trouble if they were late. According to Christina, the individually assigned obligations made it less likely that the girls would help each other complete tasks or that they would decide to share the load. Instead they were only concerned with getting their own job done.

A few of the women later added that the change did have some positive effects as well. The girls faced punitive consequences for a poor cleaning job, and with potential punishment on the horizon, Anita said that she believed they learned

to do a better job of cleaning. There was also agreement amongst some of the participants that the accountability for their chores pushed them to be more responsible in general.

The level of difficulty of the routine shifted slightly for a third time when the girls' school schedule and discipline structure changed. The young women in the first group interview described the final stage of routine as the stage of *lideres* or leaders. At this point, the girls in the home were divided into groups, and one girl in each group was designated the leader. The leader had the charge of supervising the other girls in her group to make sure the group's designated chores were completed.

Christina: A mi eso no me gustó porque era como un poco más pesado porque trabajar con diferentes caracteres, diferentes mentes, diferentes personalidades es difícil porque uno pide las cosas por favor y a veces a uno le dicen cosas que uno no quiere escuchar.

Christina: I didn't like it because it was a little heavier because working with different characters, different personalities, different minds is difficult because one can ask for things as a favor and at times they might say things that one doesn't want to hear.

The dynamics of the leaders in the final phase were negatively received by the women, particularly because they had to find ways to manage each other and hold each other accountable. However, some of the women noted that in combination with other changes in the home, the transition began to trend toward lighter chore loads, fewer consequences and, ultimately, more rest.

Amber describes:

Amber: Después vino [un director nuevo] y quitó eso y después vino [otro director] y quitó más. Ya nos levantamos a las seis o siete porque vamos al colegio en la tarde. Entonces le quedaba más tiempo. Era excelente poder dormir.

Amber: After came [a new director] and he took that away and after came [another director] and he took away more. And we woke up at six or seven in the morning because we went to school in the afternoon. So it left more time. Excellent for sleep.

Amber's quote as well as the discussion in the interviews indicated that changes in the routine of the home marked significant and distinct stages in the women's adolescence. In both group interviews, the women spontaneously organized their discussion around the changes that took place. They emphasized the routine nature of their lives in the home, a routine that in great part revolved around their chores.

With a strict, unchanging schedule any shift in the routine meant a significant change in their lives. A simple adjustment of chores had a ripple effect that asserted itself into personal aspects of their lives including when they slept, when they ate, who prepared their food, how they interacted with each other, and even their motivation for performing tasks. The women reflected a general preference toward a lighter workload. However, they also demonstrated an ability to adapt to the changes. During the most arduous routine they woke up at four in the morning and working until ten at night. The girls stepped up to the task at the time, and looking back on the routine they make the effort to point out the positive aspect of the tough schedule. A few of them could say that learned to be responsible for cleaning their space.

## *2. Discipline*

As Amber mentioned in the above quote, the variation of the routine in the everyday lives of the girls came in phases that coordinated with shifts in the administration of the home. In the interviews, the conversations on transitions in routine naturally evolved into a discussion of discipline. The women in both group interviews again divided their description of the home's discipline into three stages that related closely with the changes in the routine. The first stage that the women brought up correlated roughly with the second stage of their routine when they were given a schedule and high expectations for cleaning. At this time, girls who misbehaved were given a consequence of either more chores or a loss of privilege. Christina described the behaviors and actions that warranted discipline.

Christina: Las sanciones venían a veces por ser mal portada, por ser malcriado, por no hacer tu aseo bien, por no obedecer, por no levantarte temprano a la hora que le iba la persona encargada levantarte

Christina: The punishments came at times for being badly behaved, for being rude, for not cleaning well, for not obeying, for not getting up early at the time the person in charge put to get up.

Their opportunities to “misbehave” increased along with their household chores in stage two of their routine due the stricter obligations and supervision that had been implemented. According to Amber and Amanda, if they did a poor job of cleaning, the *consejera* supervising them usually gave them a chance to redo the task. If they did not take that chance or they responded disrespectfully, they were then given a *sanción* or punishment.

Other acts of disobedience like showing disrespect or disobeying a rule were directly punished. During this stage of discipline, the punishment was typically an additional chore. When I asked the participants to explain the possible *sanciones*, Amanda described different levels of disobedience and their retributions.

Amanda: Si solo viene y le contestaste, sea dependiendo, se ponen un castigo leve – barrer – un castigo leve. Pero si tu vienes y comienzas a faltar respeto mucho hay de poner un castigo de una semana asear la casa.

Amanda: If you only come and talk back, it depends, they give a light punishment – sweep – a light punishment. But if you come and start to show a lot of disrespect, then they will give a bigger punishment of a week cleaning the house.

Her friend Amber later clarified that a larger punishment was receiving one extra chore like cleaning the windows or one whole room for the multiple days. They did not have to clean the entire house by themselves for a week.

Another punishment was the loss of privileges. According to one woman, the counselors frequently took away her CD player when she was disrespectful to them. She said that the counselors knew that her music was the thing she cared about the most. Margara and Anita explained some of the other less popular punishments:

Margara: Ir a ayudar al jardinero. Creo que esta era una de las coas más cruel que había, verdad?

Anita: Sí.

Margara: Ponerlas a andar con el jardinero. Una de las sanciones también era quitar la televisión. Pero en el final la televisión se quitó de todo.

Margara: Go to help the gardener. I think that was one of the most cruel that there was, right?



Anita: Yes.

Margara: Have them go around with the gardener. One of the punishments was also taking away television. But in the end they took the television away from everyone.

From their conversations, the women implied that the worst punishments they could receive were the more arduous chores. I later asked one of the girls to explain why working outside with the gardener was the worst chore. She said that with the gardener they had to do difficult and messy chores like clean the yard and take out the trash. She did not like that the work hurt her hands.

The critique of this stage of discipline was split down the middle amongst the participants. Half of the women believed the harsher punishments to be more effective. Christina, for instance, attributed her maturity and change in behavior to the cause-and-effect lessons she learned when she behaved badly as younger teen.

Christina: Cuando antes eran las sanciones, de verdad yo aprendí mucho porque ponerte a barrer, asear todo la casa, limpiar toda la cocina, lavar todos los platos, ir afuera con el jardinero todo el día, ya aprendí, yo no quiero seguir así.

Christina: When before there were the punishments, I truly learned a lot because making you sweep, clean the whole house, clean the whole kitchen, wash all of the plates, go outside with the gardener all day, I learned that I didn't want to continue like that.

Here Christina expressed that the strict punishment worked well for her in terms of maturing. She learned that if she repeated the "bad behavior" she would continue to receive a punishment, but if she behaved as expected she

would not have to complete extra chores or lose privileges. The threat of a negative consequence made her correct her behavior. In speaking of other girls who got into more trouble than she did, Anita echoed Christina's assessment. Anita referred to the sanctions as the *mano dura* or "firm hand".<sup>51</sup> She expressed that the more rigorous cleaning punishments encouraged girls who disobeyed to change their ways when they realized that they were only hurting themselves with their behavior.

A few of the other women held opposing views of the stages of discipline. Amber and Amanda believed that the punishments and cleaning schedule were harsh. They welcomed the next transition into a new stage of discipline, which they refer to as reflections. With the reflections, the home took away cleaning as a punishment and replaced it with a time of introspection.

Amber: Las reflexiones de verdad, nosotros sentimos como una salvación porque los castigos que nos ponían antes eran muy duro para hacerlo [...] En traer la reflexión, creo que [una trabajadora] vio que estaba haciendo muy-  
Amanda: Muy cruel

Amber: The reflections truly, we felt like they were a salvation because the punishments that they gave us before were very hard to do [...] In bringing the reflection I think that [one of the workers] saw that it had been-  
Amanda: Very cruel.

They described a reflection as a time when then would separate from the group, think about their actions, and contemplate why they had reacted the way

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<sup>51</sup> *Mano dura* is a Central American saying that originally was used to promote strict policies against gang related crime. Here Anita uses the phrase to promote strict policy against youths' misbehavior.

that they did. For Amanda and some of the other women, reflections were a better opportunity because they allowed them to really think.

Zoe: Para mi [reflexionar] fue muy bueno porque nosotras meditábamos, “ok yo me enojé por tal cosa” y para mi era muy buena esa.

Zoe: To me [to reflect] was very good because we meditated on, “ok I got angry for this reason” and for me that was very good.

All of the women agreed, that after some time, the reflections did not seem to be effective, meaning that some of the girls who were getting in trouble did not change their behavior during the time of reflections.

To Zoe, some girls in the home did not take their time of reflection seriously.

A few of the women who preferred the cleaning punishments saw the reflections as futile.

Christina: Solo de hacer una carta en realidad no ayuda en nada porque siempre se sigan portándose mal uno. Solamente dice “O me puedo portar mal y solo me van a mandar a hacer una reflexión y escribir allí”. Hipócritamente se puede decir.

Christina: To only write a letter in reality doesn't help anything because they always continue to behave badly. Only say, “Oh, I can behave badly and they are going to send me to reflect and write.” They can say it hypocritically.

Christina, Margara, Anita, and Camila agreed that other the girls could be insincere in their time of reflection. They were frustrated that the girls who were in trouble had the same privileges as those who were well behaved. This was in part because earlier privileges like the use of the television and CD players were taken away from everyone at this point.

To them, the reflections were not as effective in changing behavior as harsh punishments and loss of privilege had been. They expressed their belief that without some punitive consequence the girls of the house had little incentive to change their behavior and improve.

Margara: Entonces así como que [reflexiones], no considero que sea buena sanción porque creo que cuando se están hablando con personas no es necesario hacer esas cosas. Pero también hay niñas que necesitan mano dura.

Margara: Then like the [reflections], I don't consider them to be a good punishment because I believe that when they are talking about people it's not necessary to do these things. Also, there are girls who need a hard hand.

The women explained to me that the house changed disciplines once again by giving the girls a chore to complete in addition to their time of reflection. Given that this change occurred right around the time that the women transitioned from the home, they had little to say on the newest stage of discipline or its effectiveness.

All of the women saw clear divisions in the stages of discipline that they had experienced. They also opened up the discussion to a critique of that discipline. For the women who assessed the castigations based on changes in behavior, the harsher cleaning punishments were more effective in their lives. It is worth noting that three of the four women who preferred the harsher method of punishment admitted to being well behaved. They did not receive the strict punishments themselves. Instead, their evaluation was based on what the changes, or lack of change, they believed they observed in other girls in the home. On the other hand, the four women who preferred the introspective

discipline based their assessment on their own experiences. They agreed that that the changes in their conduct were smaller, but they appreciated the opportunity to be able to think through their actions and behavior.

### ***3. Education***

The final theme that arose about the women's group home was education. Similar to the topic of discipline, the women analyzed their education in the home by comparing two different forms of schooling that they received. Knowing that they changed schools toward the end of their high school careers, I specifically prompted the women to tell me about both schools. They then jumped into a comparison of the two. Their first experience was similar to a homeschool program. The group home hired teachers to hold school for the girls in the house with the curriculum of a correspondence school. The girls who were in the homeschool program agreed that the most edifying part of the experience was their relationship with their teachers.<sup>52</sup> Amber attributed the majority of her knowledge and academic skills to teachers she had in the homeschool program.

Amber: La educación en [la casa] era muy buena. Sí porque los maestros ya interactuaban de un solo con uno mismo. Ya éramos más poquitos chicas y entendíamos más rápido los temas.

Amber: The education in [the house] was very good. Yes, because the teachers interacted one-on-one. We were very few girls and we understood the themes quickly.

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<sup>52</sup> One of the participants had a scholarship to attend an outside school at the time of the homeschool program.

The women noted that with the teachers in the house, they were able to receive more personalized attention and assistance. Their teachers knew each of them, and with the small class sizes, they were able to adapt the curriculum to their class's needs. They also knew the girls' schedules outside of school and could therefore allow them more leeway in turning in assignments.

The downside of the homeschool structure for many of the women was that the majority of their lives were then spent inside of the house, with the aforementioned exceptions of weekend outings. Christina explained the dichotomy:

Christina: Como, tenía mis propios maestros. A tal hora yo podía decirles, “ayúdame con esta tarea” y todo. Pero para mi era bien aburrido solo estar con mi maestro y yo, y estaba acostumbrada interactuar con demás maestros y con personas de mi edad.

Christina: Like, I had my own teachers. At whatever time I could say to them, “help me with this homework” and everything. But for me it was very boring to only be with my teacher and me, and I was used to interacting with more teachers and people my age.

Later, the girls were sent to a private high school outside of the home. All of the women noted the significance of the sudden introduction to an outside social life. Amanda discussed the change as encountering a “totally different reality”. For most of the women, the new reality was a positive experience. Anita appreciated the measure of freedom that they were afforded in being allowed to go to school outside of the supervision of the group home. Camila enjoyed the opportunity to share life with more people than just the other girls in the home.

Camila: La verdad que a mi me servía bastante porque ya comencé con más responsabilidad, con más independencia, a socializar con personas que también me podría abrir puertas en el ámbito laboral, social.

Camila: The truth is that it worked well for me because I started to have more responsibility, more independence, to socialize with more people that could also open doors for me in work and social environments.

The majority of the other women agreed that the change forced them to become more responsible.

In a larger school, the girls received less sympathy from teachers regarding their assignments and class schedules. Amanda mentioned that with the new teachers, they had to learn to be punctual. Christina further explained that they were now working with teachers who were paid hourly and did not have extra time to spend on each student. They therefore had to develop a greater degree of self-discipline.

Christina: Salir afuera a estudiar era como ya ser responsable por mi misma porque sabía que aquel día quería tener una nota alta, tenía que sacrificar sueño y fuerza y poner mucha, mucha atención.

Christina: To go to school outside of the house was like I had to be responsible for myself because I knew that whatever day I wanted to get a higher grade, I had to sacrifice sleep and effort and pay a lot of attention.

A few of the women stated that the transition to a broader social life was a challenge. They expressed that they had been highly sheltered in the group home. As Zoe said, they were accustomed to *lo sano* or “the wholesome”. To them, the sudden exposure to the outside world of immodest dress, first kisses and the smell of marijuana came as a shock.

Amber: En la casa no dejábamos a shorts o enseñar la piel pero cuando veamos las chicas con su pompitos pelados y sus shortcitos y todo eso, nos quedamos como “que onda? Nosotros no permiten hacer esto.

Amber: In the house they didn't let us wear shorts or show skin but when we saw the other girls with their bare boobies and little shorts and all of that, we were like, "What's up with that? They don't let us do that."

Half of the women saw the new exposure as a challenge as Amber did. The other half seemed unaffected.

Christina said that she knew that things like drugs were common in school from television and previous experiences with outside world. She believed herself unaffected because she had no interest engaging in those activities.

Christina: Para mi es como están destruyendo su vida. Qué barbaridad. Lo que miran en la tele, lo implementen acá. Entonces eso no me afectó mucho porque decía, "yo no lo tengo que hacer. Yo quiero seguir en la casa y yo no quiero agregar mi vida con eso."

Christina: For me it was like they were destroying their lives. How outrageous. What they saw on TV, they implemented there. So that didn't affect me much because I said, "I don't have to do that. I want to continue in the house and I don't want to add that onto my life."

From all of the accounts of their change to a new school, this transition seemed to play a significant role in the women's personal development. They spoke fondly of their homeschool program in the group home because of the one-on-one attention they received. However, the loss of that personalized help was viewed as an opportunity for growth. Four of the six women who changed schools mentioned that the change allowed them to be more self-sufficient and take on more responsibility. They were forced to learn to take responsibility for their own effort and to be disciplined in their work. The couple of women who found the transition to be more shocking than stimulating thought that the change was particularly difficult after living in the controlled group home where they mostly



interacted with each other. The shift in social realities was a taste of the transition they would go through when they left the group home to live independently. However, like their colleagues, the encounter with a new reality challenged them to relate to the world around them as individuals outside of a group home environment.

#### ***4. Group Home Accolades***

It is worth noting briefly that a fourth topic came up with frequency in the interviews, though it was not discussed at length. In six out of the seven individual interviews, the women made a point of stating that their time in the group home was overall a good experience. In one of the group interviews three of the women agreed that in the house, they were well supported, and they were given many valuable opportunities. Amanda appreciated the family atmosphere. She said that she was also grateful that they were taught to help others. Anita expressed that the group home was largely a worthwhile endeavor because they provided many girls with an education that they might not have otherwise received. She stated that the house was not perfect and everyone makes mistakes, but they tried to demonstrate love to the girls in one way or another.

Anita: Con el solo hecho de que nos apoyaban con el estudio, con la alimentación, con el vestuario, de que se preocuparían de que tuviéramos todo, nos estaban demostrando amor. Nos estaban dando cariño. No tal vez de la forma que todas quisieran pero lo estaban haciendo.

Anita: With just the fact that they supported us with studies, with food, with clothes, that they preoccupied themselves so that we would have everything, they were showing us love. They were giving us affection. Not always in the way that everyone wanted. But they were doing it.

Many of the women mentioned their gratefulness in receiving a quality education as well as for the responsibility they learned in the house. According to Zoe, the people she encountered in the group home taught her to want the best for her life. She explained what that lesson meant to her:

Zoe: Y lo mejor para mi es los estudios, tener a Dios en mi vida, tener lo que nunca tuve pero que sea bueno y conforme a la voluntad de Dios. Entonces, creo que para mi eso es lo mejor. Y alcanzar las metas y poderlas pasar o superar también.

Zoe: And the best for me is the studies, having God in my life, to have what I never had but that it would be good and conform to the will of God. So, I believe that for me that is the best, and to attain these goals and be able to make them happen or also to overcome.

The women were able to analyze and critique their experience in the group and the ways in which it affected their adolescence. It was, however, important for many of them to have the chance to express the goodness of the house and their appreciation for the opportunities they received.

### **B. Transition Experience**

After discussing the women's adolescent life in the group home, we shifted the topic to their transition from care into adulthood. All of the women had turned eighteen between November 2013 and January 2015 in the year and half before the interviews. Six of them chose to leave the group home immediately to live with family or to live alone. As the table below indicates, five of the eight women graduated from high school and began attending a local university. Three of the college students worked in addition to taking classes. At the time of

the interviews, two were still living in the group home while they worked and attended university. The three women who did not graduate from high school were each briefly employed during their first year of transition or found various informal opportunities to earn an income. At times, friends or family also supported them.

Participant	High School	University	Employment
Amanda	Not Graduated	Not Attending	Not Employed
Amber	Graduated	Attending	Part Time Employment
Anita	Graduated	Attending	Not Employed
Camila	Graduated	Attending	Part Time Employment
Christina	Graduated	Attending	Part Time Employment
<u>Margara</u>	Graduated	Attending	Not Employed
Mia	Not Graduated	Not Attending	Not Employed
Zoe	Not Graduated	Not Attending	Not Employed

During the interviews, when the conversation on the group home experience began to slow, we shifted the discussion topic to the prior year and a half of

transition to independent living. The first group decided to have each woman share her experience. After each shared, the group added comments analyzing their transitions. The second group approached the topic analytically from the beginning of the discussion. In the individual interviews, each woman elaborated on or added to the information or analysis she had discussed in the group interview. All of the conversations carried a few common themes:

1. Leaving the social bubble of the group home
2. Leaving the material bubble of the group home
3. The lessons they learned while adapting to adult life

While discussing the first two themes, the women compared their experience of transition to their experience in the group home. They discussed some of the effects that their group home background had on their transition to adult life. A few of them labeled the experience as leaving a *burbuja* or bubble, a label that I have adopted to describe their experience.

I have divided their dialogue about leaving the bubble into two sections. In the first, the participants described their past as a social bubble. They discussed the experience of being socially and emotionally sheltered in the group home and the impact that had on their experience out in the world and on their own. In the second section, they talked about the bubble as an economic isolation. Living in the group home limited their access to knowledge of the outside material world and the economic system they would be transitioning into. In the final section, the women discussed the lessons they learned from the difficulties of their

transitions and their successful abilities to adapt to adult life in the past year and a half.

### *1. Leaving the Social Bubble*

When the women transitioned out of the group home, many of them faced a challenging confrontation with the potential callousness and solitude of social life outside of care. They associated the difficulty in confronting a larger social paradigm with the lack of autonomy they received in the group home. According to Amanda, being in the group home meant being protected. When she transitioned, she faced a very different world.

Amanda: Cuando yo salí fue una etapa muy diferente. Me enfrentaba a la realidad. Ya era todo diferente. Ya no tenía mucho apoyo. No era como me cuidaban antes. Ya era como me tenía que cuidarme yo sola.

Amanda: When I left, it was very different stage. I confronted reality. Now everything was different. Now I didn't have much support. It wasn't like how they cared for me before. Now I had to take care of myself.

Amanda's dialogue about her transition revolved around the idea of distinctive realities, a language that some of the other girls use as well. For them, experiencing life back with their families or in the university was like entering another world where they had to learn anew what to expect from people and how to interact with them. They ultimately learned that growing up in the group home they had been socially sheltered.

In limiting the girls' exposure to media and outside interactions, the group home narrowed their experience with social world of culture, contemporary issues and everyday exchanges. Margara stated that when she went to the

university, she discovered that she was not well informed about some of the topics of conversation that her peers discussed.

Margara: Literalmente yo cuando me tocó a salir habían temas que los demás hablaban en las calles que no sabía que existía, problemas políticos que no sabía... Es bastante complicado querer pasar de un lugar donde te tienen con una realidad que no es realidad a pasar a lo que realmente es la realidad.

Margara: Literally when it was my turn to leave there were topics that everyone talked about in the streets that I didn't know existed, political problems that I didn't know about... It's quite complicated to want to go from a place where they have you in a reality that isn't a reality to go to a place where it's really reality.

Margara went on to say that after her transition she did not have much of a social life like her peers. She mostly moved between the university and home in, what she called, her own bubble. She did state, however, that in the group home she learned to interact with a variety of people and personalities. Her main social struggle, similar to many of the women, was navigating a broader domain that she had little interaction with previously and doing it alone.

After being in an environment where all behavior was managed and kind behavior was expected, a few of the women experienced a social shock when they encountered poor treatment outside of the group home. Zoe spent a brief period living with relatives. There, she was confronted by rudeness and criticism that she had not anticipated from family. She stated:

Zoe: En [la casa], siempre nos enseñaron que siempre nos trataron con, con respeto y todo eso. Las personas adultas y mi mama eran todo lo contrario. Parecía que estaba con cualquier mujer de la calle. Entonces, era muy difícil

Zoe: In [the house] they always taught us that they always treated us with, with respect and all that. The adults and my mom were all the opposite. It seemed like I was with any woman on the street. So, it was very difficult.

Amanda had a similar experience with family. She moved in with some relatives after leaving the group home. At first, the arrangement seemed to be going well, but after being home for a while, her family began to ignore her. According to Amanda, the experience seemed like a regression to what life was like before she went to the group home. Amanda and Zoe both said that they missed having someone to talk to. In the group home, there were other women around with whom they could share about their lives. With their relatives, however, they felt like they did not have anyone in whom they could confide.

One woman also experienced this poor treatment from her boss at one of her first jobs in domestic service. Her boss talked down to her and insulted her by calling her stupid and useless. She stated with frustration that she had learned in the group home to do the right thing, but she later believed that their instruction in good behavior did not prepare her to deal with the reality of harsh treatment from the world. The previous lessons of the *mano dura* and consequences for actions that they had learned in the home did not translate to “real life” where they could be treated poorly for doing nothing wrong.

Anita and Margara expressed that their lack of social preparedness stemmed from their limited experience in being alone. As mentioned in the previous chapter, everything in the home was done as a group from school to church to sports activities. According to Anita, the group dynamic left little space for some

of the less assertive women to be heard. She said that some of the women who had transitioned in previous years found it difficult to move forward in life because they were not given room to be self-realized.

Margara: Si se fija, la mayoría del tiempo era el grupo, hacía una actividad grupo. Y al final, en la vida no va a andar en grupo. Se va a enfrentar a las calles sola. Va a tener que andar de un lugar a otra sola. Va a tener que conseguir trabajo usted sola. Va tener que ir a comprar algo sola.

Margara: If you think about it, most of the time it was the group, doing a group activity. And in the end, in life you aren't going to go around in a group. You face the streets alone. You have to walk from one place to another alone. You have to find a job alone. You have to go shopping alone.

Margara later said that in addition to always being in the group, the girls in the home also had the constant help of the adults around them. To her, transitioning to independent living could be more difficult for the women who have never had to live without that crutch. They would find themselves suddenly having to figure out how to do everything on their own.

For Mía living away from the group was a welcomed opportunity for agency and some space of her own. She stated:

Mía: No era un cambio tan grande pero nunca me gustaba estar viviendo con mucha gente. Solo a mi me gustaba estar como entre, así como estamos, poquito porque hay menos bulla y no hay muchas personas.

Mía: It wasn't such a big change, but I never liked living with a lot of people. I just liked to live with, how we are now, few because there's less noise and there aren't many people.

Mía echoed Margara's frustrations with lack of experience they were able to gain in the home. She specifically cited the fact that she and the other girls had little opportunity to learn to navigate the city on their own. After moving out, she was



able to figure out how to get around on public transportation, a freedom that she greatly appreciated.

According to Amber, gaining agency after living alone was a dream of all girls living in group homes. For her, however, the reality of living alone was a disenfranchising experience. She explained that girls in group homes grew up surrounded by people telling them what to do. As adolescents, they perceived the constant surveillance as negative and unwelcomed. Amber later discovered that her adolescent dreams and her perspective of the group environment were misconceived.

Amber: Eso era un sueño que yo tenía siempre, como todas chicas encerradas, querer vivir una vida sola, trabajar para ti sola. Y en eso me di cuenta que eso no es real. Eso no es lo mejor. Te sientes mas vacía que nunca. Entonces, la familia es la que en realidad te hace sentir ese hueco lleno, verdad?

Amber: That was the dream that I always had like all locked up girls, the desire to a live alone, to work for you alone. And in this, I realized that isn't real. It isn't best. You feel emptier than ever before. So, family is the thing that really makes you feel that hole filled, right?

After a while of living her own, Amber began to suffer from loneliness. She expressed that her experience with solitude, despite its difficulties, taught her a valuable lesson about living well. She discovered that she needed community to survive. Amber later greatly appreciated the support of those who did help her through her transition.

When the women discussed leaving the social bubble of the group home, they brought up the difficulties in going from an environment of constant togetherness and aid to sudden autonomy and solitude. The emotional and social

sheltering that was created by the enclosed nature of the group home made for a shocking experience for some women as they encountered the potential harshness of people and relationships outside of the home. For others, the experience of merely being alone was shock enough. The general dialogue of the women expressed frustration with the fact that they had so little experience with the outside world and being on their own and in one fell swoop they were forced to navigate that social world by themselves.

## ***2. Leaving the Material Bubble***

In addition to their social limitations, the women discovered that they had little exposure to the economy of the outside world. The constraint made them ignorant of the realities of living autonomously in their society. They found that their understanding of the value of money, possessions and their own identities within the economic structure were skewed by their inexperience.

Margara and Christina attributed their financial ignorance to the fact that the group home provided the girls with all of their needs without teaching them the value or source of those needs. They were not witness to the financial planning or purchasing of the home. If they had a need for school or for a personal item, they told the administration, and it was given to them. They also had little opportunity to make purchases on their own. Margara further explained that in the group the girls were given all of the essentials as well some luxuries they would not be able to afford in the future like private transportation

According to Christina, the girls' lack of understanding of the costs of items made it difficult for them to learn appreciation of material goods and money. She said that in the home they would carelessly throw away or waste items like food because they were not aware of the financial consequences.

Christina: Dejan pudrir la comida y eso no es bueno porque en actualidad cuando salgo [...] la realidad es muy diferente porque a botar una cosa cuesta va a ser de nuestro dinero.

Christina: We let food go bad and that isn't good because now when I leave, reality is very different because throwing away something is going to come out of our money.

Margara explained that the value of food in the group home did not matter to the girls who live there because they were detached from the cost. She quoted the idiom, "Lo que no me cuesta, lo hago fiesta". The phrase expresses that if something does not cost a person anything, then that person will not appreciate it.

A few of the women expressed that their economic isolation gave girls in the home a false expectation of the responsibilities that came with living alone. According to Anita, the girls had a poor understanding of the need to work for what they had.

Anita: Siempre las mantienen en esa burbuja, que piensen se siempre va a ser así que todo siempre lo van a tener.

Anita: They always keep them in that bubble, so they think that it's always going to be like this that they're always going to have everything.

The isolation in the financial bubble additionally shocked the women when they discovered the value of money in reference to their basic needs. According to

Amber and Anita, they had no idea of how many costs they would have when they moved out their own until they transitioned.

Anita: Ha sido algo difícil, no ha sido nada fácil porque cuando sales afuera te das cuenta de que se tiene que pagar luz, agua, comida, vestuario, educación y de que uno mismo lo tiene que hacer.

Anita: It has been difficult. It hasn't been at all easy because when you leave you realize that you have to pay light, water, food, clothes, education and that you have to do it yourself.

Amber agreed with Anita stating that a major difference in living on her own was the sudden accumulation of a list of living expenses. She said that the most difficult part of the transition was learning to manage her money. Amber gave a similar catalogue of new costs to that of Anita, including basic items like clothes, food and education.

Among their lists of new living costs, two items stood out as the most shocking to the women's financial sensibilities: food and education. Margara said that she was thrown by the basic cost of groceries.

Margara: En [la casa], una nunca sabe cuanto cuesta las cosas. Por lo menos, jamás en mi vida pensé que la comida estuviera tan cara. Cuando yo salí supe que la comida tenía ese precio. Yo dije, "Por Dios."

Margara: In [the home] one never knows how much things cost. At least, I never in my life thought that food would be so expensive. When I left, I learned that food cost that much and said, "For God's sake."

Later in the interview, she and Camila expressed their frustration at the cost of a single meal. They explain that if they wanted to buy lunch while they were in the city, the cheapest option was 105 Lempira (\$4.75 US dollars) for a piece of chicken and some rice at a fast food restaurant. The cheapest option at the

university was 150 Lempira (\$6.78 US dollars). Camila said that she could not afford to eat out unless the meals were on sale.

The women were additionally surprised to find out how much costs would weigh into their decisions to continue their education. According to Christina, Margara and Anita, figuring out what they could do and what they wanted to do with their lives was a great challenge. Margara explained that for her the decision was further complicated by variables of costs that she had not been aware of. When she began to look into universities, she found out that some majors were more expensive than others and the costs were different between universities. The discovery added a new factor that she did not know she had to consider when she was choosing her life's career.

Christina's primary guide in her choice of university was finding a flexible schedule that would allow her to work. She needed to be able to keep a part time job so that she could pursue her studies and cover the expenses on her own. When Christina entered the university she was taken aback by the costs of the simple supplies she was required to have for classes.

Christina: Cuando yo salí para ir a mi universidad era como me sentía como rara, extraña y a ver las cosas cuanto les costaban también quedé como, "Esto cuestan los libros! Esto cuesta un lápiz!"

Christina: When I left to go to my university, it was like I felt weird and strange and to see how much stuff cost. It also left me like, "This is how much books cost! This is how much a pencil costs!"

Christina's first encounter with managing money was figuring out how to budget for her school supplies from the stipend she received from the group home.

When a few of the women arrived at university and at their jobs, their unique background caused them to be branded with a class identity that they did not relate to. The group home they lived in is tucked away in a gated and wealthier neighborhood of Tegucigalpa. Camila said that when people at work first asked her where she lived they assumed from her answer that she was wealthy.

Margara had the same experience.

Margara: En la universidad todo el mundo me pregunta o todo el mundo me miren en la U y piensan “allí viene una riquilla” o “tiene dinero” o cualquier de las situaciones que al final no es la realidad, pues. Que la realidad es muy diferente.

Margara: In the university, the whole world asked me and the whole world saw me as in the University and thought “there comes a rich kid” or “she has money” or whichever of the situations that, in the end, isn’t reality. Reality is very different.

Both women were irritated by the mistaken identity. They repeated that that the reality of their lives, particularly their current circumstances as independent adults, was not what it seemed. The experiences of living in group home as adolescents: a safe neighborhood, private transportation, a good education, did not translate to their current lives as young working-class women supporting themselves while attending university.

The women discovered that their lack of understanding and participation in the economy added an extra layer of obstacles that they would have to cross in their transition to adulthood. They connected the omission in their knowledge to the lack of exposure to money practices and costs of living in the group home. As a result, the women found that upon their transition they faced the double task

of understanding the basics the economy while they learned to participate in it. They also learned the power of the economy as they discovered that money had a great influence in their lives, their decisions, and their identities.

### ***3. Lessons Learned***

Through a discussion mainly of challenges and obstacles to transitioning, all eight of the women made it a point in the group and individual interviews to mention the success that they had in their maturation over the past year and a half of transition. Through their various critiques of and frustration with their experience, it was clear that that their transition was a great challenge and there were many aspects of that transition for which they did not feel well prepared. However, the women observed adaptability in their own lives through their capacity to learn, mature, and evolve in the face of challenge and change.

When discussing the task of understanding and managing money, three of the women talked about their successful experiences in taking the initiative to learn life skills. Christina recalled a moment in her transition when she stopped complaining about not having help. She made the decision to assess herself and decide what she wanted to do with her life. Christina sat down and wrote a list of her long-term goals then the short-term goals she would need to complete in order to meet her future objectives. She then organized her schedule and her monthly income.

Christina: Entonces, tengo organizada mis horarios, el presupuesto de que hago para gastar, y mis clases. Entonces de lo que me enseñaron, lo he

tomado en esta vida adulta que estoy manejando recién nueva para que no se me va a ser difícil

Christina: So, I have organized my schedules, the budget that I do for spending, and my classes. So what they taught me, I have taken up in this newly recent adult life that I'm managing so that it won't be difficult for me.

I asked Christina whom it was who taught her to budget and organize her life.

She told me that she observed good habits in different adults around her and went to each to learn different life-skills. She and Camila came to a similar conclusion that part of their ability to develop was dependent on the examples and authorities in their lives and on their own ability to take the initiative to learn. When Camila started working, she realized that she had to develop a detailed budget and purposefully allocate her income. She learned on her own to be disciplined with her money so that she could make it living independently.

Anita also found that she needed to be intentional about her approach to managing adult life. She stated that she had a similar period of fear when she left the simplicity of the bubble and had to decide what to do with her life.

Anita: No haber alguien que venga y te diga, "Yo te pago los estudios. Yo te compro la ropa. Yo te doy de comer." Sino que una misma se tiene que forzar en ese parte. Y cuando llegué en este momento, lo que decidí fue no preocuparme sino que ocuparme en eso...

Anita: There's not anyone who comes and tells you, "I'll pay your studies. I'll buy you clothes. I'll give you food." Instead one has to strive in this area. And when I arrived at this moment, what I decided was not to preoccupy myself but occupy myself in this...

In place of worrying, Anita took the initiative to determine what she wanted to do and how she could manage her life. She mentioned that a large part of her



success was taking into consideration two pieces of advice that she received from family when she was a child. One piece of advice was to not be envious because, if she could not have something now, then she could earn it later in good time. She was also told repeatedly that she could not miss something she never had, like a car or a laptop. From these lessons, she learned to be wise with her money and possessions. Instead of worrying about what she did not have, she focused on learning to do well with what she did have, knowing that later in life she would have a chance to gain more.

Anita and a few of the women noted that in many ways the difficult process of transitioning forced them to mature socially and emotionally. According to Zoe, the past year of transition was the most emotionally impactful phase of their lives. She expressed that she felt the impact and pain of difficulties more keenly because they were often a result of her own mistakes. Zoe explained that for the first time, the women had the opportunity to make their own decisions. Therefore, they experienced the weight of their decisions more powerfully during their transitions than they had in the past. Zoe went on to explain that they are now in a different phase of their transition in which they have new opportunities and support. She and Amanda discussed their circumstances:

Zoe: Nos están enseñando a –

Amanda: A valorarse.

Zoe: A valorar -

Amanda: A valorarse uno mismo, a seguir adelante uno mismo.

Zoe: A poderse desenvolver como adulto. So, esto es bueno.

Zoe: They're teaching us to –

Amanda: to value-

Zoe: to value-

Amanda: to value oneself, to press forward on your own.

Zoe: To be able to develop like an adult. So, that's good.

Zoe said that in her current situation, she is now able to appreciate the opportunities she has to move past her mistakes and pursue her goals

Amber and Mía have also come out of their first year of transition looking ahead. Amber stated that she is grateful for everything she went through. She said that the difficulties made her mature. Like Zoe and Amanda, Amber learned to value herself. In her interview, she exuded confidence. I asked her if she always had this attitude of self-assurance, and she replied that she had developed in in the past year. In the group home, Amber went to the new high school nervous about the competition. When she received her grades, she realized that she was capable of doing well in the different environment. Again, when Amber entered the university, she performed well and knew that she could succeed. Amber additionally learned that she needed other people around her in order to succeed. She began to appreciate the support that she did receive from a few people around her. She said:

Amber: Me ayudó a crecer, a ser la persona que soy, a ver más allá de lo que - más allá de mis límites. Puedo ver quien quiero ser, quien puedo ser.

Amber: It helped me to grow, to be the person I am, to see more ahead to that which - more ahead of my limits. I can see who I want to be, who I can be.

Amber's experiences helped her refine her view of herself and her goals. She echoed Zoe's sentiment that the obstacles that she faced made her appreciate the

opportunities for housing, employment and education that she later received. Mía also expressed her gratefulness for the opportunities that she was later given to help her press forward. After her struggles with finding a job the year of transition, she later saw it as her duty to appreciate the opportunities and support that she received. She expressed feeling newly motivated to push ahead and live as a self-sufficient adult.

### **C. Goals for the Future**

The final topic in the guideline of the interviews was the women's future goals. The women were asked simply if they had goals in mind for their future. In the focus groups, each of the women described her goals to me. They then had the opportunity to elaborate on their goals in the individual interviews. Upon analysis of their transcripts, four themes emerged in all of the conversations:

1. Self-assessment of their goals
2. Career goals
3. Relational goals
4. Religiosity

In discussion of the first theme, six of the women gave an analysis of their goals, the achievability of the goals, and whether or not their goals had changed since living in the group home. The second theme was discussed by seven of the eight women who gave their academic aspirations and career goals, which were principally comprised of their desire to graduate from university and their hopes to continue their educations and travel. Seven of the women mentioned family in

their future goals. For some, they wanted to use their own achievement to assist their family members; others discussed their desire to form a family of their own. Five of the women also mentioned God's will in their future.

### *1. Self-Assessment of Goals*

Six of the eight women considered their goals in terms of a self-assessment. A few of them discussed what they thought about their goals and evaluated their capacity to achieve their goals. Some of the women gave their perspectives on the ways in which their goals had evolved over the past couple of years or had remained the same. Margara and Amanda came to the same conclusion that their main aspirations had remained consistent but the timeline of accomplishing their goals had shifted.

Margara: Mis metas, creo que sí cambiaron. No en totalidad, pero sí cambiaron. Primeramente no lo dejaba todavía [...]. Solo que me estoy dando como un tiempo para llegar a eso

Margara: My goals, I believe they have changed. Not completely, but yes, they've changed. First of all, I still haven't given them up completely [...] I am just giving myself some time to get there.

Margara wanted to pursue a degree in the sciences for many years, and she continues to move forward toward that goal. However, she expressed that her career will be delayed.

Amanda similarly stated that she expects her goals to be postponed. Her goals of either going to college or pursuing a trade have not changed since she has transitioned from the group home, nor has she lost confidence that she will

achieve them. Amanda said that she does believe her aspirations will be more of a challenge to reach than she had previously realized.

Amanda: No está vez va a ver ayuda. No va a ver quien esté conmigo allí diciéndome, “Tienes que hacerlo”. Sino que si yo quiero lograr mis sueños tengo que aprender a seguir adelante yo misma [...] va a costar un poco pero lo voy a lograr

Amanda: This time there's not going to be help. There's not going to be someone with me saying, “You have to do it.” But if I want to accomplish my dreams, I have to learn to move forward myself [...] it's going to cost me a little, but I going to achieve it.

Amanda and Margara's accounts of their delayed goals suggest that they adapted to a positive outlook in their new paradigm. Neither woman doubted or abandoned her dream. Both were faced with obstacles in their independent living that caused them to give up the immediate pursuit of their goals in order to be able to accomplish step one: living self-sufficiently and continuing their educations. However, Margara and Amanda have accepted the delay in their plans without giving them up.

The other six women also maintained the same goals that they have had for years. Camila stated that her aspirations have remained the same from the time she left her home to now, and they continue to revolve around her family. One of the participants is pursuing the career in communications which she has wanted since she was a child. Another is pursuing a career in engineering that she has desired through her adolescence, though her ambitions are more specific now that she is in the process of accomplishing them. For Anita, the fixed nature of her goals gives her confidence that she will achieve them.

Anita: Hay muchas personas que a partir de un año o dos miran a su situación y miran que no avanzan en eso. Lo dejan atrás. Lo dejan en el olvido. Y yo realmente he seguido aferrado en eso y siento que sí, sí lo voy a cumplir.

Anita: There are many people that after a year or two look at their situation and see that they can't advance in that. They leave it behind. They forget about it. And I really have continued forward clinging to that and I feel like yes, yes I am going to accomplish it.

The experiences of Anita, Amber, Camila, and Christina differ slightly from those of Amanda and Margara because the former have been able to pursue their goals immediately after transitioning from the group home. They have not had to cope with a delay. In the way that Anita describes her own experiences, it would seem that the women's investment in their long-standing goals serves as strong motivation to continue to pursue and accomplish those objectives.

Zoe and Mia did not discuss their goals in terms of change or their likelihood of achievement. Both of the women gave goals that were nonspecific. In listing her goals, Zoe mentioned multiple career options that she had desired since she was younger as well as other opportunities to travel that she discovered recently. Mia expressed the desire to be self-sufficient as her primary objective. Additionally, both have struggled to get on a path of pursuing their goals since their transition.

In looking at the discussions of Mia and Zoe along with those of the other women, there is an apparent correlation with the women's experiences in working toward their goals over the past year and their perspectives of their goals. Amanda and Margara had to put aside the direct pursuit of their goals.

They now view them as achievable but delayed. Anita, Amber, Camila, and Christina have been able to pursue their goals, and they gained confidence from their own persistence. Zoe and Mia have not been pursuing any particular goal over the past year. When they discuss their objectives, they are not specific in how they imagine their futures.

## ***2. Career Goals***

Education was once again a major topic of conversation. Seven of the women explicitly listed finishing their studies as one of their main goals for the future, including two of the women who have not graduated from high school. The five women who graduated from high school were pursuing their bachelor's degrees. The graduates all had specific plans for their careers, and among them, they demonstrated a variety of career choices including medicine, veterinary practice, physics, psychology, law, journalism and business. A few of the women additionally desired to obtain a masters degree in another country.

For Margara, Christina, and Amber their academic goals fit strictly into their short terms plans along with saving money. From there, their goals grew in quantity and specificity.

Christina: Yo actualmente estoy poniendo mis decisiones. Estoy haciendo un plan de vida, metas de corto y largo plazo. Mi meta a corto plazo es primero empezar a trabajar y empezar a ahorrar y aprender hacerme independiente y actualmente, seguir estudiando

Christina: I presently am making my decisions. I'm making a life plan, short term and long-term goals. My short-term goal is first to work and start to save and to learn to become independent and at present, continue studying.

After graduating, Christina stated that she would like to get a master's degree in Spain or in the United States, before getting a job with one of the major international organizations in her field. Margara also placed graduating and traveling into her long-term goals. She said that she would like to get a master's degree in Europe and travel later as a tourist.

In her short-term goals, Amber stated that she does not only wish to graduate, she wants to do so in a shorter time than most other Honduran students.

Amber: Después de cruzar la universidad - que eso es de tres o cuatro años, sacarme mi carrera en tres años, pero siempre hay [cambios] en la vida, una no sabe, entonces para cuatro años – quiero sacar mi maestría en otro país.

Amber: After I'm done with the university – that is in three or four years, finish my degree in three years, but there are always [changes] in life, one never knows, so for four years – I want to get my master's in another country.

Amber said that she hopes to be able to return Honduras after her master's degree set for a good career. She listed multiple countries in Europe, North America, and South America as potential hosts for her master's degree. Camila and Anita also discussed their goals to graduate from university and follow their desired careers. Neither mentioned a desire to pursue a master's degree. However, Anita did express a strong desire to travel.

The career goals of Amanda, Zoe and Mía were less specific than those of the women who are currently attending university. Two of them stated that they want to graduate from high school. They also mentioned earning undergraduate



degrees as a possibility among other career options that they might like to pursue for their lives. Zoe has multiple career plans.

Zoe: Tengo sueños y quiero seguir con mis estudios porque dejé de estudios. Y quiero seguir con mis estudios. Quiero ir a la universidad. Quiero obtener mis tres títulos principales-

Zoe: I have dreams and I want to continue with my studies because I left studies. I want to continue with my studies. I want to go to the university. I want to obtain my three main degrees -

Along with her various degrees, Zoe would also like an opportunity to travel to the United States. Amanda mentioned pursuing a career in the university or in a trade. In addition, she said she also wants to travel. For the time being, Mía said that her desire is to have a job and live on her own.

The clarity of the women's career goals seemed to relate to their level of education, which placed some of them closer to obtaining their goals. The women who earned a high school degree while at the group home were pursuing their undergraduate degrees. They had specific careers in mind and were taking steps towards their later goals, like working or saving up for a master's degree. The women who did not receive high school degrees while at the group home were not actively pursuing their education or a specific career at this point in their transition. They were not certain which career path they would pursue, citing multiple options for degrees or employment.

### ***3. Relational Goals***

In discussing their futures, another major theme that emerged in the women's interviews was that of relationships. All but one of the women

mentioned family in their goals in some capacity whether it was a desire to connect with family members or a hope to start a family of their own. Camila, Christina, and Margara discussed their family in terms of support. Camila stated that she wants to make a difference in her family, in part by being a financial and spiritual support for them. Christina also said that she wants to help her family by providing them with a home.

Christina: Y quiero como fomentar eso de la palabra "familia" en mi vida porque no he tenido como una familia así bien unida, nunca. Siempre tenía problemas, pero ya ahorita que estoy viendo la realidad de la vida, quiero ayudar a mi [familia] hacerle su propia casa y poder vivir con [ellos].

Christina: I want to form the word "family" in my life because I have never had like a family so well united, never. I've always had problems, but now that I'm seeing the reality of life, I want to help my [family] build their own house and be able to live with [them].

Christina and Camila both mentioned that they want to help their families move forward in life. Margara also said she would like to support her family members, particularly the ones who have supported her. In addition, she stated that she has a dream to unite her family and build a relationship with relatives who are no longer connected.

Four of the women mentioned specific goals that addressed their siblings. Margara, Camila and Anita expressed a desire to see their siblings succeed. Margara stated that one of her primary goals is to see her siblings graduate and achieve their own goals. Anita had a similar desire. She hoped that her siblings would have the opportunity to pursue an education and to travel. Anita stated

that her dreams for her siblings are motivated by the hardships she watched them go through.

Anita: Si [ellos] necesitan algo de me, yo puedo les ayudar. Creo que esa es la mayor meta que tengo y creo que es la mayor.

Anita: If [they] need something from me, I can help them. I believe that is the main goal that I have and I believe that it is the best.

Christina also said that she would like to be able to aid her siblings in getting ahead in life and help give them some stability.

Camila wanted to enable her siblings to push ahead. She was, however, very specific in desiring that they do so on their own volition.

Camila: Quiero sacar a mis hermanos adelante. Y quiero que también valoren - o sea tienen que esforzarse por lo que ellos quieren porque si les da todo, a ellos no le va a valer porque como se lo dan. Entonces a ellos les tiene que costar.

Camila: I want to push my siblings forward. I also want that they value – or that is that they would strive for what they want because if you give them everything, to them it won't be valuable because they gave it. So it has to cost them.

The goals of these four women extended beyond their own ambitions. They hoped that the success they might achieve in the future could additionally benefit their families. In their discussion of supporting their families, the women demonstrated confidence in the achievement of stability for themselves as well as a further desire to use that stability to anchor their families.

Mía, Christina and Zoe listed forming a family of their own amongst their future goals. Mía stated that she would like to start a family in place of the family that she never had growing up. Christina and Zoe both said that they

desired to get married one day and have children. The other six women did not mention anything about marriage or children in their future goals.

Outside of kin relationships, Zoe and Amber expressed a desire to form a surrogate family from their community of support. Amber found a friend and mentor to whom she would like to be a daughter. Zoe desired that the women from the group home would form a familial network of their own.

Zoe: Y también me gustaría, bueno, lo que yo pienso es que nosotras podíamos seguir juntas, no siempre va pero que no perdamos comunicación que nos mantengamos como familia.

Amber: Sea un soporte, sería bueno.

Zoe: And also I would like, well, what I think is that we could move on together, not always but that we don't lose communication that we keep ourselves like a family.

Amber: Be a support. That would be good.

Zoe and Amber also mentioned the value of having a community when they discussed their transitions. They maintained the importance of a support network in considering their futures.

It is striking to note that all but one of the women included family in their goals in some capacity. By nature of growing up in a group home, each of them has experienced some sort of instability or hardship in relation to her family. A familial network continued to be an important concept for the women. They expressed their need for family in different ways. Some of the women stated that they wanted to support and unite their existing families. That is not, however, a goal that is shared by all of the women with families. Two of the women who are in contact with their relatives did not mention a desire for a connection with

their families in the future. It could be that their more recent negative experiences with their families, as mentioned in the section on transitions, have affected their desire to unite or support their families.

Given the weight placed on families, it is not surprising that Zoe and Amber wanted to form a surrogate family from the women of the group home. They learned the importance of the support of a community and hoped to maintain the support system that they developed. Another curious element of the interviews is the lack of aspiration toward marriage and children amongst the women. The desire for children is believed to be a strong social norm for women in Honduras and a reflection of their value in society. However, only three of the women shared a desire for a spouse and children of their own, and those three mentioned it briefly with little emphasis or explanation. Instead they discussed in detail their economic and career goals. The young women were primarily interested in becoming self-sufficient, earning multiple degrees, traveling the world and supporting their families.

#### ***4. Religiosity***

I will briefly touch on the theme of religiosity that emerged in the women's discussion of their goals. Five of the women mentioned the role of God's will in their futures. When discussing her college graduation, Margara used the phrase *si Dios me permite* or "If God allows me to". Amanda used the same phrase when she said she wanted to finish high school. Christina also mentioned God's will in her career when she talked about getting her masters degree.

Christina: ...después, tener un buen índice para sacar mi maestría en España o, si Dios quiere, en Estados Unidos o en México

Christina: ...after, have a good record to get my master's in Spain or, if God wants, in the United States or Mexico.

Mía used the phrase *espero en Dios* or “I hope to God” twice and the phrase *sólo Dios sabe* or “only God knows” when she discussed opportunities that she had for employment and housing. Zoe also stated that what she wanted more than anything was to follow God’s will.

As mentioned earlier, Margara was experiencing some delay in pursuing her career goals. In the group interview, she stated that God spoke to her about the delay.

Margara: Considero que Dios me dijo, “Todavía no es el tiempo para que cumplas esto.” Entonces lo que yo estoy haciendo no es trancarme esperando que llegue el momento sino que continua.

Margara: I believe that God told me, “It still is not the time for you to accomplish this.” So what I’m doing now isn’t to block myself, waiting until the moment arrives but continue.

Margara expressed that she found comfort about the delay in her belief that God ordained her steps and will allow her to accomplish her goals in his timing.

Christina also found comfort and confidence in her believe in God when she reflected on the poor social state of Honduras.

Christina: A ver eso, me siento que la sociedad necesita una ayuda. Si el gobierno no lo puede hacer que lo puedo hacer yo, no sola pero se que con Dios, él me va a ayudar. Le dirijo todo a él. Yo confío en él que, si me ayudaba hasta aquí actualmente donde estoy, me seguirá ayudando.

Christina: To see this, I feel that the society needs help. If the government cannot do it, I can do it, not alone but I know that with God, He will help me.

I direct everything to him. I trust in him that, if he helped me up until right here where I am at, he will continue helping me.

Given that Honduras is 95% Catholic and 5% Protestant, it is perhaps to be expected that religiosity would emerge as a theme in the interviews.<sup>53</sup> God was also mentioned a couple of times in the discussion on the women's transition. Amber stated that she believed that God had a purpose for everything that happened during her transition. Anita attributed her mental stability during her transition to her belief in God.

Anita: Otra cosa que siempre me dio miedo era el que poder salir y estar afuera cambiará mi forma de pensar [...] pero gracias a Dios mi mente en este entonces no ha cambiado nada en absoluto y creo que es por el saber que Dios existe y es el único poderoso y grandioso que hay.

Anita: Another thing that always scared me was that I could leave and be outside and my way of thinking would change [...] but thank God my mind in this has not changed at all and I believe that it is because of the knowledge that God exists and is the only powerful and magnificent one that there is.

Both women attributed their experiences during their transition to God's role in their lives. For Amber, God would use her experiences in His plan for her life. Anita's belief in God grounded her through the changes of independent living.

It is striking that the theme of religiosity emerged more strongly when the women discussed their futures. The women who have experienced set backs or instability seem to take comfort in the belief that God has a plan for their lives. The women also expressed confidence in their goals believing that God would help them accomplish what they set out to do.

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<sup>53</sup> "Honduras," *The World Factbook*, continually updated, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

### **III. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I will summarize the study's findings and offer recommendations for group homes and the state of Honduras based on the findings. The aim of the study is to gain a better understanding of the lived experience of young people under government care in Honduras. I specifically examined the challenges facing young women as they transition from living in a group home to independent living. The study focuses on the participant's perspective of their lives in the group home, their transition to independent living, and their goals for the future. I hope that the perspectives of the women in my study will advise private group homes of the challenges adolescents face living in, and transitioning from group homes.

#### ***A. Findings***

In analyzing the interviews, certain themes emerged across both focus groups as well as the individual interviews. The participants first discussed their experiences living in a group home. Their conversations revolved around the routines in the home, the discipline and the education. When they discussed routines, the data suggested that their lives in the group home were strictly managed. The women had little to no agency in deciding where they could go or what they could do. They lived according to a detailed schedule of cleaning, cooking, and schoolwork with a slight change during the weekend when they would go out to play sports or attend church. In their highly regulated lives, a



change in the routine brought about by a new administrator or a reformation of the home would send out a shock wave of effects.

A new schedule and system of discipline shifted many personal aspects of the women's lives. The changes affected the women's bodies. The schedule that was created for them determined when and how much they would sleep, when they ate, who prepared their food, and where they were physically allowed to be at any given time. The schedule additionally affected the women's relationships with each other and their roles in the home. The punitive chore system made the women less likely to collaborate on tasks and more likely to focus on what they had to accomplish in order to avoid punishment. Each of the smaller transitions was considered significant in the perspectives of the women, likely in light of their strict routine. The transition to a new school outside of the group home, for instance, exposed the women to a small piece of the "real world". For some, contact with the real world was a shock. They struggled to navigate the new social world that differed from their sheltered lives in the group home. The women generally agreed that the new school gave them some opportunity to develop their sense of responsibility and social skills.

The second topic that the participants discussed was their transition to independent living. Many of the women used the term "bubble" to describe their lives in the group home and the experience of leaving the contained environment. Life in a group home was highly structured and isolating. The women felt that their social development and their capacity to be self-sufficient

had been stunted by their limited exposure to the outside world. One woman stated that she discovered that life in the group home was not “really reality”. After moving in with their families and attending university, many of the women realized they had been socially sheltered and would have to learn how to interact with people in the real world, some of them for the first time.

Most of the women went from a systematized space where they were constantly surveilled to living without any regulation or guidance either on their own, or with friends and family who had not been not involved in their lives. A few of the women who lived alone or with family struggled with loneliness and building a community after they had been constantly surrounded by people in the group home. Ileana Molina, the social worker I interviewed, mentioned that freedom and independence was a priority for transitioning youth. The women in my study seemed to agree that living independently had been a dream of theirs, but that dream was a challenge in reality. Some found themselves disenfranchised with independent living. All of the women including those who remained in the group home during their transition expressed that they had to develop independent living skills on their own. Some of the skills that they mentioned struggling with were money management, transportation and navigating higher education. A positive aspect of the transition was the opportunity to learn basic skills for the first time.

Under the topic of their transitions, the women discussed the lessons they learned and the independent living skills they developed over their year of

transition. Their lack of experience in making decisions and managing their own lives frustrated their transition, but it did not seem to affect the ways in which the women perceived their own capabilities. They did not see themselves as helpless or lacking efficacy like studies of foster care transitions in the US had found.<sup>54</sup> The women all demonstrated a sense of self-reliance and determination when they discussed their ability to push forward despite their struggles and limited resources. Without outside help, the women took the initiative to learn independent living skills on their own.

The participants finally discussed the topic of their future goals. The data suggests that women's future goals were hopeful and ambitious. Like their discussion of lessons learned from transitioning, the women demonstrated confidence in their ability to achieve their goals. The women who had graduated from high school and were on a path to accomplishing their career goals had clearer aims in mind. They had already made decisions towards the first steps of pursuing their ambitions through academic careers and employment. They also discussed high academic goals like receiving multiple degrees and attending a university in another country. The women who had not graduated high school and were not yet specifically pursuing their goals had more general aims. They mentioned multiple career possibilities and a desire to become self-sufficient.

The women's goals were not limited to their present experiences or their own accomplishments. Their goals tended to revolve around relationships. Seven of

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<sup>54</sup> Gomez, "Understanding Emerging Adulthood", 115.

the women expressed a desire to support their families or form a family of their own. Two of the women wished to form a family by maintaining a close community with their friends. The women also desired to benefit their families when they achieved success. They were confident that they would be successful in their careers and financially stable, and they wanted to spread that stability to their families.

### ***B. Recommendations for Group Homes***

Based on the findings of my study, one recommendation to group homes in Honduras would be to make the experience of living in a group home as close to the normal adolescent experience as possible. It is apparent that living in a group, for these young women, was a sheltering experience that limited their understanding of life in the outside world. Increasing the youth's contact with the outside world could allow them to develop more of their social and independent living skills before they make the abrupt transition. The transitioning youth would benefit from exposure to independent living skills prior to their transition. Training in independent living skills might include learning hard skills like navigating via public transportation, managing money, seeking and acquiring employment, acquiring housing and navigating the university system. They would additionally benefit from opportunities in the outside world to practice independent skills, like riding the bus or spending money, as well as social skills, like developing friendships outside of the home and managing conflict. A final recommendation would be for group homes to

provide a period of transition during which the transitioning youth could have access to resources that would help them develop their independent living skills while they eased their way into becoming completely self-sufficient.

The research could be enriched by furthering the study to gather the perspectives of men and women transitioning from many different types of homes in Honduras. Furthering the scope of the study would bring in the perspectives of youth who transitioned with various levels of resources at their disposal. It could also allow for a gendered analysis of group home living and transition to independent living. The perspectives from my study could be used as a pilot study for investigation into the transition of youth from multiple group homes in Honduras.

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