Writing Ethnographies: Non Profit Management in the Emerging Market

Lydia Singerman, 2013

This summer, for my research I was curious to explore the politics, bureaucracy, hardships, and daily activity that go into creating, running, and working for a successful non-profit organization. In particular I chose to focus on Western run non-profit organization that work in developing countries. I was inspired by my time spent abroad in Ghana; while overseas I observed many non-profit that floundered due to culture barrios. In order to explore this topic I conducted ethnographic research. Ethnography is a written description of a culture or selected aspects of a culture. Ethnographies join together two distinct and separate worlds: the mainstream world of the researcher and the obscured and often unseen world of the selected cultural members. As a student who exists in the mainstream world of academia I wished to explore the culture of the small start up non-profit.

In order to complete my summer field research I immersed myself into the non-profit world. Elizabeth Scharpf founded sustainable Health Enterprises (SHE) in 2008. She discovered that millions of girls and women in emerging third world markets do not have access to affordable menstrual pads. Currently the only pads on the market are premium priced international brands, which are too costly to purchase for that market. In addition these imported products contain superabsorbent polymers and bleach, which are harmful to the environment. Lack of access to adequate menstrual supplies for woman during their monthly period impacts women’s health, education, economic opportunities and dignity. SHE along with its partners intends to fulfill girls’ and women’s unmet needs by helping local women in emerging markets jump-start their own businesses to manufacture and distribute affordable, quality, and eco-friendly menstrual pads. SHE has developed a patent pending novel process that uses a mechanical treatment method (wet blending followed by dry fluffing) and locally sourced raw materials to ensure affordability, accessibility, increased local employment and environmental friendliness.

This summer, I focused on my role as a participant observer. As the Global SHE Intern I work along side Ms. Scharpf, founder and CEO, and CeCe Camacho, COO. During my summer I conducted field research and documented my first hand experiences in a serious of detailed field notes. While working on my personal projects for SHE, I recorded Skype meetings, phone calls, casual conversation and commentary, and general observation. Having been fully immersed in this world I have a greater understanding of a sub culture and will be able to contextualize my research in an Advanced Independent Studies in the Gender and Women’s Studies Department this fall semester.