
July 2021

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Heather Montes Ireland

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Recommended Citation

Ireland, Heather Montes (2021). 'Noble Mothers' and their Others: Racialized Women Entrepreneurs and Poverty Finance. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(7), 69-82.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss7/6>

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'Noble Mothers' and their Others: Racialized Women Entrepreneurs and Poverty Finance

By Heather Montes Ireland¹

Abstract

Microfinance has become standardized within global development policy, disproportionately impacting the lives of women of the global South and, increasingly, in the global North with the dismantling of the welfare state. Poverty finance policies employ an entrepreneurial model to facilitate women's labor market participation whereby borrowers are extended microcredit, or small loans, to invest in their microbusinesses. Global poverty finance is, however, deeply gendered and racialized in ideology and practice. This paper explores the ways that *entrepreneurialism*, as a cultural formation, privatizes women's labor into normative gendered, feminine, and domestic labor sectors alongside the expansion of markets and neoliberal restructuring of economies. This paper argues that entrepreneurialism, and its narrative and visual rhetoric galvanized by poverty finance brokers, uphold a gender- and racially segregated micro labor force based upon a false dichotomy of "noble" racialized mothers of the global South as respectable entrepreneurial subjects. As the neoliberal capitalist logics of global poverty finance rearticulate the burden of impoverishment onto the poor, this encumbers the microentrepreneur to 'rise above' her class and socioeconomic conditions. In the global North, however, mothers of color largely define the margins of entrepreneurialism, and are often decried as recipient subjects. Entrepreneurial policies and practices re-create the politics of austerity and anti-welfare sentiment that have long undervalued the kincare, social reproductive labor, and mother work of women. This paper, lastly, argues for focus to the creation of feminist economic policies addressing the structural conditions of racial capitalism and its colonial and imperial legacies.

Keywords: Women entrepreneurs, poverty finance, domestic labor sectors

Introduction

"As the state is privatized, so too are the social problems of the citizenry. Matters of shared consequence, once addressed through public decisions about how to organize collective life, are recast as personal problems to be solved through rational individual choices" (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011, 22).

In a global capitalist economy full of uncertainty for the working classes, the solution being proffered is self-employment. Reliance on global capitalism has produced a labor market brimming with employment insecurity, stagnating wages and growing strains on paychecks, waning opportunities outside of low-wage work, exploitative conditions, and an ever-increasing concentration of wealth among the owning classes. The entrepreneurial narrative is certainly

¹ Heather Montes Ireland is an assistant professor in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies and affiliate faculty in the Critical Ethnic Studies Program at DePaul University, Chicago, USA. She is currently working on a monograph that examines how cultural constructions of entrepreneurialism shape public policy with repercussions for low-income mothers of color. Email: hirelan1@depaul.edu ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9834-2321>

compelling under those conditions—being one’s own boss, keeping a flexible schedule, and turning what you enjoy doing into a living—and, further, it is a salve for many displaced, unemployed, and underemployed workers. Entrepreneurial rhetoric makes an attractive proposition that free markets and flexible labor are the answer to the very ills of capitalism itself, and as with the transnational phenomenon of microfinance,² the cure from the conditions of poverty and economic marginalization. Microfinance institutions and popular media report extraordinary accounts of poor women delivered to an empowered entrepreneurial subjectivity through the capitalist free market opened by microcredit.³ Entrepreneurial narratives reify the sentiment that microcredit is solid economic development policy and above all, is morally right: women need to better their lives through the free market and make their own economic opportunities. This persuasive narrative appeals to Western middle-class sensibilities while it deftly elides the structural oppression of gender, class, race/ethnicity, and colonialism in the lives of low-income women of color⁴ transnationally. Global poverty finance, as I argue, is deeply gendered and racialized in ideology and practice, reflecting larger global financial struggles.

In this paper, I explore the ways that the cultural ideology of *entrepreneurialism* is galvanized by poverty finance brokers as it operates to “re-privatize,” as Goodman (2010) terms, women’s labor into normative gendered, feminine, and domestic labor sectors. In order to gain support for microfinance programs, global poverty finance brokers leverage entrepreneurial ideologies of work society to interpolate the subjectivities of women of color of the global South and North oppositionally, creating new finance markets that “put gender to work” with a reliance upon racialized modes of gender to demarcate noble and respectable work, and workers. Conservative political tropes have long produced the categories of the ‘unworthy’ poor and the ‘deserving’ poor, though here these narratives are reproduced and repackaged, hidden in plain sight. Furthermore, this happens along with a transfiguration of the “private” sphere of labor and a reinscription of normative values of gender and sexuality. Insofar as women of the global South never cross borders, particularly into Western countries, they are considered, as I argue, worthy, “noble mothers” who embody normative gender and sexual subjectivities useful for racial capital. Poverty finance brokers often perpetuate ideologies and drive policies which exacerbate labor market inequities, wealth gaps, and other economic violence against women of color in the global South and North, in the name of saving women.

² Microfinance is an umbrella term that refers range of financial services centered on the practice of funding small loans to the poor who would otherwise have little or no access to credit, banking, and investing tools. Often described by the press as tapping into “the hidden wealth of the poor,” and heralding a new era of development in our increasingly globalized society, microfinance institutions (MFIs) have, in their estimation, “revolutionized” poverty alleviation policy around the world, particularly targeting feminized poverty. The organization and structure of current-day microfinance is attributed to the work of economist Muhammad Yunus and his Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, which was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006.

³ Microcredit is a central aspect of microfinance that refers to small, uncollateralized loans made to poor and low-income borrowers, the majority of whom are women, and predominantly targeted in the global South. Considered high risk within traditional financial systems, these borrowers often do not possess conventional banking services, such as savings accounts. Microcredit loans are funded with the provision of starting or sustaining small-scale, and in the case of women, largely home-based, small businesses or “microenterprises.”

⁴ Rather than solely indicating a U.S. or Western identity category, I use the term *women of color* here interchangeably with *racialized women* to demarcate *non-white women* in a broader global context. These terms, then, denote the workings of race and ethnicity in the social systems of women’s lives, rather than identities. While ‘white’ is certainly a racial category, it is typically only made ‘visible’ in regard to class. My intention is to highlight how non-white women are racialized in ways that white women are not, and how racialized gender is a constitutive factor in the global microfinance industry beyond U.S. racial categories.

I do not take issue here with the culturally and historically differing roles that lending itself has taken throughout various societies, nor the ways in which those who are under resourced, underbanked, and relegated to the margins of financial markets may seek the economic opportunities available. Similarly, a focus on the democratization of finance⁵ is necessitated to redress the perpetuation of the concentration of wealth and credit with the masculine asset-owning classes. Microcredit itself may offer some useful purposes in that regard, along with more aggressive measures, as perhaps one strategy of financial inclusion which can attempt to ameliorate an infinitesimal aspect of racial capitalism's inequities, yet microcredit lending is the anti-poverty strategy dominating the practices and policies of the global development community (Karim 2011). And as Ananya Roy describes it, microfinance has become the "Washington consensus on poverty" (6). Rather, this paper understands microfinance as a key example of aspirations of "poverty governance," which aims to "reshape and regulate" the conduct of the poor (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011), using entrepreneurial logics of self-determination and dignified work to do so.⁶ It is within this context that I focus on two interrelated issues: the re-privatization of traditionally women's work within a micro labor force, and the production of noble woman/mother entrepreneurial subjectivities.

Compiling an archive of hundreds of photos, artifacts, and visual and textual rhetoric of the largest microfinance organizations that appeal to donors in the global North to study the narratives of entrepreneurialism dominating poverty finance practices in the global policy sphere, my study utilizes an interdisciplinary methodology. Through lenses of transnational feminisms, feminist political economy, and critical theory, this paper illuminates the ways in which microfinance institutions capitalize on rhetoric both visual and discursive of women of color of the global south, particularly the image of the mother, to promote their funding practices.⁷ I find that microfinance institutions and advocates promote gendered, racialized, and (hetero)sexualized tropes of "microentrepreneurs" that adhere to normative ideologies of dignified work and reinforce the appropriate public/private divide for the "noble mother" micro-entrepreneur. These depictions of poor mothers of the global south construct a "noble mother of microfinance" who appears in stark contrast to the ways poor mothers of color in the U.S. are represented in poverty alleviation policy, such as anti-welfare sentiment and workfare policy though the goals of these programs are much the same in promoting normative, respectable work.

Entrepreneurialism and "Re-Privatization" of Poverty

The entrepreneur is ubiquitous, valorized throughout U.S. popular culture, corporate industry, electoral politics, and increasingly in institutions of higher education.⁸ As U.S. society's

⁵ See Ananya Roy's nuanced discussion of the promise and accountability of development policy in her monograph, *Poverty Capital*.

⁶ While appearing to operate largely within the private sphere, often in a person-to-person lending paradigm, it is important to note that microfinance has become global development policy and an aspect of U.S. workfare programs, which I will discuss further.

⁷ Though microfinance institutions (MFIs) have largely gained recognition under the rubric of "women's empowerment," these depictions point toward the necessity of critical feminist analysis of the interpolation of U.S. and third world women of color by global policymakers.

⁸ Examples are many and varied, from popular culture's TV show *Shark Tank*, to the god-like and cinematic enshrining of the late Steve Jobs who has been the subject of approximately six biographical films and documentaries in the period 2011-2015. Degrees in entrepreneurship from the associate's degree to the doctorate are offered on university campuses and online, in hundreds of business and management schools across North America. In Bloomington,

most honorable capitalist label, the entrepreneur exists as a true vanguard of liberty, willpower, and the efficacy of hard work. Entrepreneurial “spirit,” as it were, is a stand-in for moral character and independence, extending beyond the mere state of self-employment or the identity of businessperson. Entrepreneurialism, I posit, is the cultural formation and fascination with entrepreneurship as the penultimate independent working subjectivity that has arisen alongside the neoliberal restructuring of social and economic life. I further suggest that the collision between entrepreneurialism and privatization of anti-poverty policy through finance also operates to privatize the labor of poverty-class racialized women micro-entrepreneurs of both the global north and south.

Poverty finance policies employ an entrepreneurial model to facilitate women’s labor market participation through self-employment, whereby borrowers are extended microcredit, or small loans, to invest in their microbusinesses. The entrepreneurial logics of microfinance have propelled its popularity into matters of U.S. foreign and domestic policy. In 2000, the US Congress passed the *Microenterprise for Self-Reliance Act*, which states “it is in the best interest of the United States to assist the development of micro-enterprises and of enterprises of the poor in developing countries.” And microfinance, more than any other potential anti-poverty solution, is featured conspicuously in UN development doctrine, such as in the Millennium Development Goals, of which poverty alleviation appeared prominently as a worldwide objective. As microfinance gained global authority as a poverty-fighting tool,⁹ microfinance institutions (MFIs) spread throughout the global South and the North with MFIs operating in countries throughout the world today.

Microfinance mega-institutions,¹⁰ like Kiva and Accion, have become household names. These organizations bank on the affective currency of the person-to-person microlending model: that an individual, or group of individuals (typically in the global North), can lend money to a borrower in need (typically a woman of color in the global South), improving lenders’ and borrowers’ lives in the process. Kiva.org, started by Americans who found the microfinance model compelling, appeals as a person-to-person lending website, where one can individually lend as little as \$25 USD to “empower people around the world.” This claim misrepresents the complex network of organizational activities, field sites, banks/lenders, and the financial webs of microcredit administration as Kiva itself works with almost 400 “field partners” who qualify borrowers, fund loans, and then forward borrower photos and stories to post on Kiva’s website. Intricate systems of finance are made to appear deceptively simple, with little focus on the cost of the loans to the borrower, the high interest rates, and the measures taken to ensure repayment.¹¹ The marketing is expressly concerned with the promotion of images of microcredit borrowers, the majority of whom are women. As the microfinance industry has grown more sophisticated in its assessment of their donor market, microcredit borrowers are described as microentrepreneurs with increasing frequency. This classification indicates more than the social capital that the borrowers obtain through their affiliation with an MFI, it also provides a paradigm of entrepreneurship as a

Indiana, the home of Indiana University, a partnership between IU’s business school and the local school district garnered entrepreneurship programs in grade school to acquaint 4th and 5th graders to be their own bosses.

⁹ Demonstrated by the awarding of the 2006 Nobel Peace prize to Grameen Bank

¹⁰ For the purposes of this research, I utilize the term microfinance “mega-institution” to refer to the large transnational non-governmental organizations which fund smaller MFIs on the local level.

¹¹ This paradigm is indicative of the ways that microfinance is presented to the larger public and policy makers. As the battle against poverty is privatized, the details of credit and finance are easily glossed over. So, too, were the differences between for-profit and non-profit microfinance banks. Perhaps not surprisingly, for-profit microfinance institutions have also proliferated, though the original organizations were non-profit entities for the express purposes of not capitalizing on the poor.

proven model of success for the owning classes and therefore a potentially liberatory vehicle for the poverty and working classes the world over that simply has not been tapped.

Microfinance entrepreneurialism enables the enactment of neoliberalism's adored flexibility,¹² fashioning discrete economic actors who can take responsibility for their own (mis)fortune. Carla Freeman (2014) has described how the core neoliberal element of flexibility emerged in her ethnographic work with Barbadian entrepreneurs as a constant refrain approximating a mandate, from individuals themselves to state and non-governmental organizations. "Flexibility," as Freeman asserts, "requires not only that individuals retrain for an ever-changing set of job requirements in the new economy but also that they foster a heightened sense of individualism" (19). Hyper-focus on the individual is entrenched in the ideology of the self in Western thought, reifying American meritocracy; the notion that hard work will produce upwardly mobile and comfortably middle-class existences regardless of starting position. Meritocratic ideology also reinforces the opposite: that failure to achieve middle-class status is because of the choices and movements of the individual actor. This mentality elides the forces of oppression and power in social, political, and economic hierarchies. Indeed, microfinance is embedded in neoliberal ideology of self-reliance, independence, and meritocracy—reifying notions that ultimately hold the poor accountable for poverty. And as entrepreneurial poverty finance policy has proliferated, so have risen the numbers of women living in poverty.

Over many decades of structural adjustment policies (SAPs), welfare to work reforms, and privatization under neoliberalism, microcredit programs have multiplied, effectively shifting the focus on poverty alleviation to the private sector. These changes have disproportionately impacted the lives of women of the global South, and increasingly in the global North. In the U.S., microfinance programs were instituted alongside welfare-to-work reforms since at least the 1990s (Jurik 2005). Transnational feminists have critiqued the increased privatization of social services through the neoliberalization of the state, pointing out the devastating results of market-oriented policies which have had serious consequences for multiply marginalized communities in the global south and north (Grewal and Caplan 1994; Chang 2000; Naples and Desai 2002; Mohanty 2003; Alexander 2005; Desai 2009). Collectively, these policy changes have deepened the "feminization" of poverty, wherein the majority of the world's poor are women, and women are the poorest of the poor (Seager 2009).

Feminist scholars, such as anthropologist Lamia Karim's (2011) study of microfinance in Bangladesh, have demonstrated the ways microenterprises intensify gender disadvantage. And Mary Hawkesworth explains, "they increase the debt of poor women, imposing new levels of stress and well as responsibility [...] for women, who already work longer hours than men, earn less, and are restricted to lower quality employment than men" (2011, 57). In the global South, privatization takes the shape of SAPs implemented by their governments as a condition of the IMF and World Bank development loans. In the global north, it can manifest in welfare reform and implementation of welfare-to-work laws. In every case, decreased government spending on social services leaves low-income women balancing the escalating demands on their unpaid labor at home alongside a reliance on their power to earn an income in the marketplace. At this precarious junction, where the supportive role of government is downsized and social services are all but eliminated,

¹² Neoliberalism refers to a broad set of "political economic theories that put primacy on the principles of capitalist economic competitiveness," (Flores-Gonzalez, et al. 2) which include individual responsibility, flexibility, free markets, free trade, and deregulation. Privatization is a prodigious sixth characteristic of neoliberalism in addition to these five main precepts, or perhaps is better understood as an overarching concept which incorporates all the prior.

microfinance's prompt to work for oneself appears the only feasible option for the many who cannot find work (or rather, a living wage).

The discrepancy between the entrepreneurial ideal and how it is enacted on/to the bodies of low-income women of color is considerable as the microentrepreneur does not resemble the Western, typically American, male techno-giant in form nor access. The pervasive figure of the masculinized entrepreneurial subject, largely white, that is the standard-bearer of capitalist achievement is a representational totality, but moreover it is the norm and the privileged position that structures the preconditions of financial accomplishment. Gender, racial and sexual politics are embedded in systems of global finance as they are in other aspects of society. And indeed, racial capital's reliance on hierarchy and inequality is further concentrated at the site of racialized gender. Most women-owned microenterprises are in childcare, retail, food, and beauty care—the feminized realms of labor and additionally the least lucrative. Through entrée into micro-entrepreneurship, poverty class racialized women's labor is privatized into the informal labor sector through cottage and home-based businesses. Women microcredit borrowers also typically utilize the home as the site to produce goods or services, while businesses owned by men are more likely to use the home solely for clerical tasks; with the most profitable are businesses using the home for the latter (Pratt 2000). The esteem of middle-class professionalism and technological expertise, with all its wealth-building potential, is not apportioned to poor and low-income microcredit borrowers. Though entrepreneurialism is mapped onto their lives, racialized women micro-entrepreneurs are depicted not as start-up geniuses, professionals, or wealth-builders, but are instead regarded through racialized gender narratives that largely maintain a gender-segregated micro labor force. And furthermore, microbusiness ownership creates the consummate gendered worker for capitalist economies. Microentrepreneurs in the informal labor market are also the flexible workers who are not entitled to protections and benefits of formal employees because they are the perceived owners of their own labor.

“Noble Mothers” of Microfinance: The Entrepreneurial Poor

Microfinance institutions traffic in both visual and discursive rhetorics of the noble poor. The faces adorning the marketing materials for these organizations, in photographic and video images, are most often that of a smiling third world woman of color. These sympathetic figures of poverty-class women¹³ are depicted profusely in microfinance industry promotional materials, with the message both implicit and often made very explicit: everyone deserves a chance (see figure 1). In this section, my analysis focuses on how the neocolonial imaginary of a monolithic Third World woman is made salient within the U.S.-based microfinance industry to construct what I term the “noble mother of microfinance” as the impetus for global capital microlending. The microfinance industry solicits capital from middle-class donors, as I argue, by producing and circulating images of “noble poor” mothers of the global south, images that rely on the binary of the deserving and undeserving poor.

Just as the U.S. poverty-class welfare recipient evokes distinct stereotypes of what Michael Katz (1989) terms *the undeserving poor*, the noble mother of microfinance emerges as the *deserving poor*. She is depicted as a noble African, Latin American, or South Asian mother

¹³ Though MFIs are beginning to include more images of men, the likeness of the racialized mother as a marketing device is emblematic of the perceived successes of microfinance, particularly in relation to UN policy. Two of the eight Millennium Development Goals set forth in 2000 by the United Nations align with the claims of MFIs: eradicating extreme poverty and hunger throughout the world while empowering women and promoting gender equality. These women then, as microcredit borrowers, are symbolic of the unprecedented success of microfinance in the “developing” world.

happily, and gratefully, working in her microbusiness. Pictured in front of her sewing machine or textiles, she is illustrative of how, according to microfinance advocates, simple access to free market, Western-style capitalism through microcredit can empower women to pull themselves up by the bootstraps, even when they do not have shoes.

I utilize the term noble in describing this woman's image to demarcate certain mythological constructions of the poverty class that microfinance empowerment discourse is predicated upon. The noble poor are those "hard-working, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable" persons (Allison, 1994) that the upper- and middle-class may take pity on since the noble poor are kind, respectable, and ascribe to white Western middle-class capitalist values—but who have just been dealt a difficult hand. In other words, they most resemble people who do not *deserve* their impoverishment, for in this story, class status and caste are merely reduced to individual actors and actions. The noble poor have not "asked for" their lot in life and are grateful for any chance granted them by benevolent philanthropists and benefactors.

The "noble mother" of microfinance is constructed as this type of noble poor subject and is therefore deemed worthy of the bequests of those more fortunate. The noble mother is also where the "Third World difference" of the racialized women of the global south and the U.S. bootstrap myth collide, quickly absconding with the complexity of economic and structural violence against low-income women of color within a system of neocolonial, global racial capitalism. Rather, she becomes a standard bearer of meritocracy, a palpable narrative in the U.S. imaginary of capitalism and the Western ideological fixation on "work ethic," self-reliance, and internal motivation. It instructs that if properly motivated and willing to work hard, people can provide for themselves and their families. And if they cannot, it must be their own deficiency.

However, these hegemonic constructions of the poverty class, rather than revealing the structural conditions of economic violence, "mystify poverty," as Moira Baker (2000) describes,

"by erasing the historical and economic conditions that produce, indeed require it, in advanced capitalism. These discourses then replace history with a cultural myth: that anyone who is willing to work hard will rise out of poverty and that anyone who cannot rise out of poverty is either unwilling to do so—lazy—or naturally incapable of any human development—trashy" (117-118).

This myth serves the inequities of racial capitalism, for as the racial capitalist system itself relies on hierarchy and inequality to maintain itself and to accumulate profit, it requires narratives that justify this inequality. There remains little motivation to account for historic and ongoing inequality when it is believed that there are not issues of power and structural oppression which cannot be undone through the self-liberation of the Western work ethic and the free market.

These "cultural myths" are powerfully deployed within the context of entrepreneurialism. One microfinance mega-institution, Accion, uses this compelling language on their website to invite donors to support their programs:

"[E]xplore the stories of our clients and their families. They inspire us, and they serve as good examples of how millions of brave and industrious people are working their way up the economic ladder, with dignity and pride" (Accion, web, 2015).

Beneath this statement are three small photos: a smiling brown woman with twinkling eyes is pictured between two men, and one of the two men is also smiling. The photo of the smiling man links to a webpage with a large, full-color image depicting him and his wife in their microenterprise. Their photo is captioned: *Alfredo Hernandez and Silvia Perez, carpenter and weaver, clients of Génesis Empresarial in Antigua, Guatemala*. He stands, active and energetic; she sits with her two young daughters nearby in the right-hand side of the photo, working the loom in her hands. The respectable and heteronormative aspects of the couple are first emphasized on the website, and then subsequently their microbusiness:

“Alfredo Hernandez and Silvia Perez aren't just proud parents to a beautiful young family in Antigua Guatemala; they are excellent business partners. He is a carpenter [...] which is how he now makes a living. Silvia makes intricate Mayan embroidered fabrics in her backstrap loom, an ancient tradition carried through generations in this part of Guatemala. Silvia [...] learned business skills and got her first small loan. The couple has since taken out an individual loan to improve their home, which used to have plank walks, a corrugated tin roof, dirt floors, and a wood stove. They now have a two-story brick-and-mortar building with a proper roof, cement floors, and a gas stove. They can't wait to finish up their house and expand their business, which will include a storefront in this brand-new building” (Accion, web, 2015).

Immediately, the viewer is struck by the very (hetero)gendered configuration of this couple and their story: Alfredo is a good father, a carpenter who supports his family; Silvia is the noble mother who performs very gender-appropriate work as a weaver. Also, this work is the “traditional” work of her culture, passed on by ancient civilizations. With the loom in her hands, the children positioned around her in the bottom right-hand frame of the photograph, and the background of a stereotypical open shack-looking building, she represents the appropriate hard-working and respectable mother of microfinance. Pieces of corrugated tin, wood planks, and open walls, and what looks like a dirt and cement floor complete the photo, all markers of what resembles Third World poverty to a Western audience.

Silvia's depiction, and her activity, merits transnational feminist analysis to reveal how she is gendered and racialized as a third world women of color microentrepreneur. Through the gaze that constructs her as the pliant noble mother of microfinance, her work is viewed as traditional, and therefore, feminine and feminized. This reads as an indication to a potential donor/lender of her ability to develop this handiness into a microenterprise and a steady income, at least enough to pay back her loan. In the digital age, wealth is concentrated not with those who produce fabric and cloth but with those who own the means of technology and mass production. The loom—itsself a great technological invention—is rendered backwards, steeped in tradition and culture as is the racialized woman's body, and is fixed upon the weaver as a marker of her natural inclination to perform “women's work.” While poor and low-income women who seek public assistance are coerced into waged work at any cost, those who seek the private assistance of finance and credit are funded for cottage industries that replicate traditionally feminine labor.

Silvia's likeness is made to effortlessly fit into normative notions of the respectable poor who desire to work hard to “better” their conditions with dignity. Racialized women microentrepreneurs such as Silvia and the many depicted in this similar way, are made noble poor subjects: primarily, noble mothers as mothers are to be understood as traditional, heterosexual,

married women who understand and abide by social mores. And secondly, they have demonstrated their worthiness through willingness to live by the all-important Western values of capitalist devotion, work ethic, and enterprise by choosing microentrepreneurship. Noble mothers do not cross borders and they do not seek public assistance, rather their appeals are to the private sector, where she demonstrates she is entrepreneurial and self-directed.

Microfinance and Work Imperatives

“Mention the word welfare in a room full of people in the United States and you can expect to see brows furrow and mouths tighten in disgust. Welfare, the colloquial term for some public benefits in the United States, no longer holds its original meaning: well-being. Instead, it has become a pejorative term used to label “welfare mothers” or “welfare queens” (Gustafson, 2011).

I have described how the microfinance industry capitalizes on the image of the noble mother to promote its financial products, and that image relies on the binary of the deserving and undeserving poor. Racialized women in the global South are represented in microfinance narratives to invoke the compassion and benevolence of Western citizens for entrepreneurial poverty reduction schemes, while tropes of low-income mothers of color in the U.S. have been galvanized for attacks on the poor women, particularly in the service of anti-welfare sentiment and welfare retrenchment. In this way, the construction of the noble mother of microfinance depends on her Other, the recipient mother. Gender, race, and sexuality shape these depictions and funding practices; poverty finance policies and practices are entangled with notions of women of color subjects in the global South and in the United States. As racialized, gendered, and sexualized tropes of U.S. Black women and Latinas were encoded in the formation of “welfare queens,” and issues of gender normativity and work imperatives were central to these constructions. While the noble mother of microfinance is traditional, married, and otherwise “reproductively respectable” (Hong 2015), the welfare mother breaks with traditional motherhood norms. The noble mother of microfinance seeks entrepreneurship and the free-market capitalist system as a duty-bound mother, while the welfare mother appears to publicly reject work society’s moral compulsion to submit to the wage labor system. Described as manipulative, lazy, reproductively procreant, and uneducated (yet sly in the fine points of bureaucratic state procedures so as to defraud the system), the welfare queen image was leveraged to shift poverty policy in the U.S. from the war on poverty to “workfare,” the welfare-to-work initiatives that dominate U.S. social welfare today.¹⁴

Soss, Fording, and Schram (2011) write that “the politics of poverty is not an island unto itself, untouched by broader dynamics of power and conflict in the American polity” (18). Rather, poverty governance, as they illustrate, is a system of regulating and controlling the behaviors and subjectivities of the poor. As they insist upon an understanding of poverty governance as a deeply racialized formulation, I also maintain the necessity for an intersectional analysis of the simultaneously gendered and sexualized nature of the ways poverty policy is constructed and meted out. Feminist public policy critic Catherine Marshall (1997) points out that the policy arena is in the “public, dominant, legitimate discourse,” and cultural values and ideologies in the public

¹⁴ Public opinion for welfare reform, as documented by Reese (2005) was galvanized under presidential administrations from Reagan to Clinton to Bush by use of these racist stereotypes of women of color, undermining support for social welfare and resulting in PRWORA welfare reform policy. Reese also notes that ideologies of race, class, and gender had long been used against poor women, especially women of color, in the U.S. since at least the 1950s.

domain travel into the policy making that shapes the micropolitical (6). The microfinance industry produces images of the noble mother as noble and dignified, self-sufficient and respectable, strong yet feminized. In this paternalist rendering, the noble mother of microfinance truly knows poverty, and the recipient poor are ever more ungrateful and unwilling to submit to the work imperative. These issues are concentrated at the site of gendered and racialized work and the laboring body. When the noble mother of microfinance works hard, then she is made even more virtuous in relation to her other.

References to work are abundant in microfinance promotional literature and the descriptive language that accompanies the images of noble mothers of microfinance follow a strict entrepreneurial narrative. Microcredit borrowers are described as “hardworking” and “strong,” “lacking opportunity,” “providers,” in need of a “fighting chance” and, it is worth noting, as “entrepreneurs.” A promotional mailing for MFI Accion (Accion, 2016) quotes a microloan borrower, Alejandra, as saying of her clay pottery craft, “when the work is dignified, it doesn’t matter if it’s dirty.” They continue, “we [microcredit lenders] can be the force that helps millions of families work their way to a brighter economic future, with dignity and pride.” It is a compelling narrative, one that signals to the goals of social and economic justice, while the appeal itself is draws on the myth of meritocracy that assesses one’s willingness and determination to rise above class. The language seems to address broader the systemic issues, yet quickly veers to capitalist notions of hard work; the issue of work itself is a preoccupation that has galvanized the racist anti-welfare movement in the United States. The prevailing belief that poor women do not work, and particularly poor mothers of color, remains the prominent issue that policymakers seize upon to deem recipient women unworthy of empathy, support, and wellbeing. These beliefs have devalued or ignored the domestic and reproductive labor that women perform to make all other work possible, yet neither is the reverse the goal: the valorization of work itself. As Kathi Weeks (2011) describes, “the attack on poor women that was perpetrated in the name of the work ethic [in the 1996 U.S. welfare reform debates] should inspire the reconsideration and reinvention of feminist perspectives on waged work” (12), including the interrogation of the work relation and how gender is recreated in and through work. The insistence upon waged work to secure livelihood is the prominent social relation and obsession of work society as much as it is a technique of poverty governance and social control. An assertion that most of us, as workers, submit to as well as impose upon others, although “the willingness to live for and through work renders subjects supremely functional for capitalist purposes” (Weeks 12). The pro-work fascination precludes us from imagining other modes of being and other ways of applying our energies outside of work’s usefulness to capital and profit.

Undoubtedly, these distortions—noble mother and welfare queen—elide the lives, histories, and bounded options of women of color under global racial capitalism. These constructions are better understood together as technologies of poverty governance which function to constrain the subjectivities of women of color of both the global North and South. The contradictions of noble mother representations also participate in logics that surpass these boundaries. Indeed, these ideologies reveal the contradictions of poverty governance that construct boundaries between low-income racialized women “here” in the global North and “there” in the global South. A subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, insistence that true poverty does not exist in the U.S. and that the “third world” only exists beyond borders, is revealed as inconsistent and contradictory at the spatialized conjunction of the noble mother and welfare mother. One is well-deserving of empathy and aid, the other undeserving of that entitlement and scorned for her indigence. As long as the third world woman does not immigrate across U.S. borders, the U.S.

woman of color and the racialized woman of the global South are depicted distinctly and disparately. The recipient mother defines the margins and exposes the limits of free markets and heteropatriarchy by revealing the public, structural nature of poverty which neoliberal microfinance brokers attempt to conceal.

Conclusion

“Capitalism utilizes the raced and sexed bodies of women in its search for profit globally, [...] and it is often the experiences and struggles of poor women of color that allow the most inclusive analysis as well as politics in antiglobalization struggles” (Mohanty 2003, 250).

Microfinance is now standardized within global development policy, disproportionately impacting the lives of racialized women of the global South, and increasingly in the global North. As I have argued, the politics of entrepreneurial poverty finance rearticulate the burden of impoverishment onto the poor, and it remains within the purview of the entrepreneurial subject to “rise above” her economic situation. The cultural formation of entrepreneurialism is galvanized by poverty finance brokers in an oppositional rendering of the “noble” microfinance entrepreneur as she is set against the recipient woman within a racial capitalist system and work society. Juxtaposed to the ways poor mothers of color in the U.S. are depicted in poverty alleviation policy, such as the “welfare queen” trope that renders poverty-class women of color ingrates and deviants, the representations of third world mothers are imbued with seamliness and respectability. This false dichotomy is utilized to gain financial support for microfinance programs and private finance markets, driving policies that exacerbate gender and racial labor inequities. The falsehoods in rhetoric and representation contribute to a public discourse that asserts that poor and low-income women need not the assistance of the government, nor the alleviation of structural inequities, but rather, the salvation of capitalism. Here, the regulation of bodies and behaviors of poor women of color becomes the point of scrutiny rather than the afflictions created through the (il)logics of neoliberalism and racial capitalism.

Transnational feminist scholarship critiques neoliberalism, economic globalization, colonialism, empire, and global development policies, though microfinance programs have often avoided critique with associations of “women’s empowerment” into labor markets through microentrepreneurship and financial inclusion. Muhammad Yunus (1999), for instance, has suggested that credit should be a fundamental human right. While financial inclusion is an important aim, financial inclusion is not the equivalent of addressing the colonial legacies of racial capitalism nor longstanding and widening gaps in wealth disparities. And anti-poverty policy certainly cannot work if it recreates the politics of austerity, relying on anti-welfare sentiment which has long undermined poor women’s wellbeing. Nor can it rely on entrepreneurialism’s emphasis on the individual while failing to contend with the structural, and empowerment through entrepreneurship remains limited by gendered and racialized socio-economic structures and cultural contexts.

Microfinance cannot be the sole nor predominant anti-poverty alleviation strategy in the world. Feminist anti-poverty and economic justice policy that addresses the structural conditions of racial capitalism and the feminization of poverty, such as gendered labor segregation, and that values the reproductive, mothering, kincare, and unpaid labor of women and gender minorities is the solution to economic and social equality. Reinvestments in strong public finance, social

welfare, and care networks which counter privatization are necessary as “privatization works by making the public seem non-existent or historically obsolete at the very point where it is most responsible for the individual’s survival” (Goodman, 127). Privatized, individual, antisocial modes of existing are not the solution, but are rather key to the dissolution of communities that poor and low-income women of color rely upon. Only a focus on relationality and collective solutions to poverty that are attentive to the economic violence experienced by women of color of the global South and North will create a non-violent future that ensures social and collective liberation.

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