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Microenterprise: Antipoverty or Antiwoman?

Microenterprise has been deemed as a solution to the world's economic woes. Starting in the 1980's non-government organizations (NGOs), not-for-profit businesses as well as global institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund, began to lend money primarily to women to begin small-scale businesses. In fact, one of the men who had a large role to play in the policy-making and implementation of microenterprise won a Nobel Peace Prize. Furthermore, the topic has received extensive, and on the whole positive, coverage in the press, radio and academic journals. However, when microenterprise is framed within a feminist construct, feminist scholars were quick to point out the complexities of the economic system. And when a feminist lens is applied to the issue, many problems emerge from its construction and implementation. The project of this paper is to enumerate and detail the short-comings of microenterprise, an analysis conducted within a feminist framework – the implicit argument is that another method of economic “empowerment”, “development” and “education”, should be pursued. Furthermore, in order to illuminate some of the discrete factors that co-construct to form the complexities of “empowerment”, “development” and “education” I will examine microenterprise in South Africa and the United States.

The empowerment, development, and education of socio-economically disadvantaged women is wrought with imperialist intentions. While this is not

necessarily the case in the United States¹, imperialist intentions provide justification for any given NGOs decision to fund microenterprise. For example, at a 1994 Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW) gathering, the then vice-president Lyndsay Hackett-Pain addressed the affiliated groups and spoke of her travels in South Africa. She related the fact that in a specific village, “Men and children gather nuts but only women crack them,” and asked that a group associated with the ACWW look into alternative technology to split the nuts, “Nothing too technical and advanced – something that is a step up from using axes.” Furthermore, she touted the romantic virtues of the village stating how their lives were “away from all the cares and troubles of the world.” (Mindry 1189).

Hackett-Pain’s story is rife with images of oppressed third-world women who endure hard labor, economic impoverishment, inadequate technology and exploitation by men (Mindry 1189). These first-world women in England are taking it as their duty to rescue their third-world counterparts. This is, of course, imperialist in nature – applying one’s own cultural values to another and coming to the conclusion that their way is either more efficient, less exploitative etc., ignorant of the fact that these value of efficiency, exploitivty are inherently culturally-relative.

Economic and political empowerment co-construct to form larger systems of power, especially within a local community. This was the case in post-apartheid South Africa, when white women used essentialist arguments to appeal to women of different races and socio-economic classes to ensure that these predominantly black, lower-class women would not use their newfound economic means to affect a political end. For

¹ Instead of imperialist, much of the rhetoric and discourse surrounding microenterprise in the United States is paternalistic.

example, one white woman of parliament stated that “Men are interested in the pomposity of power, women want power to get things done.” (Mindry 1200) In the same vein, members of an antiapartheid group, the Black Sash, claimed “Women across the country know peace is more important than power, that a decent existence for our families is more important than scoring political victories.” (Mindry 1200)

Implicit within these statements are not only overtones of imperialism and paternalism, but also entrenched essentialism (Mindry 1200). At the same time that black women are being allowed a certain economic space and agency they are told that the space that they must occupy must not stretch beyond that of the private or social sphere.

A further implication of these essentialist statements about women is that they reaffirm the “natural” notion of what it means to be a woman. These naturalizing notions are then exploited to further disempower women, for they may be used to reinforce gender roles. For example, in South Africa black women were told to use their “power for good” and in order to facilitate change should “suppress their anger” because “wom[e]n [are] soft. No matter how angry you are, your anger must not destroy. You must rest your case in a soft manner. One of the qualities of women must always be love. Our manner must always be constructive. We need knowledge, so we should improve our skills no matter what,” (Mindry 1201).

The complexities of the education part of the enterprise equation are blatantly obvious in South Africa, for most of the grassroots organizations consist of white women. Feminist discourses of the 1970’s and 1980’s drew attention to rural, “third-world” women as objects for idealization and worthy of intervention – the “tradition” continues in South Africa today, where it is “up to” the white women of the NGO’s to educate the

rural, African women about economic enterprise (Mindry 1203). In these interactions, black women, more often than not, became frustrated to the point of disengaging with the project. For example, one African woman frustrated about working with white women stated, “[white women] get all the money from our work, but they don’t do any of the work – they’ve never been to any of the places we work.” Additionally, one South African woman remarked on her engagements with white women, “You must talk to me like a human being,” (Mindry 1205).

When the question of, “Who is helped?” is posed, the complicated relationship between development and empowerment is exposed. In South Africa, where the focus of microenterprise, has been on black, rural, women, a group that was most severely marginalized by apartheid policies and practices, young, urban, women are a demographic that is completely ignored by NGO funding. While in South Africa rural, black woman are certainly impoverished, they are not the only marginalized and impoverished group. Furthermore, not only are these women who fall through the gaps ignored economically, they are marginalized, silenced and to a certain extent disenfranchised politically. For, many of these grassroots NGOs have a larger political agenda and/or are politically affiliated on a larger global scale. Therefore, women whose needs are not addressed economically by these organizations are most certainly not getting their political needs addressed as well.

Ever since its inception five years ago, microenterprise in the United States has been hailed as “one of the hottest anti-poverty strategies” (Ehlers and Main 424). Microenterprise is not directed at welfare recipients, rather though at low-income groups

not normally serviced by banks or business support groups, especially women and racial-ethnic minorities.

Like in South Africa, microenterprise in the United States does little to promote actual empowerment of women. Rather, women are encouraged to pursue business interests within the private sphere, referred to as “pink-collar jobs”, which include cleaning, day care, cooking, baking, sewing, handicrafts, and selling women’s products. These pink collar business are disempowering, for, not only are they the pre-dominantly dead-end, contingent and unstable, but (like in South Africa) they only reaffirm traditional social and cultural stereotypes of “women’s work” (Ehlers and Main 430).

Furthermore, microenterprise education in the United States is misleading, inaccurate and detrimental. Much of the educational curriculum, or teaching women how to run their own business, reinforces and perpetuates romanticized visions associated with microenterprise without addressing real-world business problems or the realities of managing a pink-collar business (Ehlers and Main 434). Additionally, microenterprise education and training largely ignores the gendered practices that women bring to the business world. In fact, not only are the gender differences ignored, but women are encouraged to adopt traditionally masculine characteristics, such as competitiveness, aggressiveness, risk-taking and authoritativeness, in order to succeed (Ehlers and Main 435).

In terms of actual economic development, American microenterprise policies fall far short, for as it is practiced, it ignores larger infrastructural conditions impinging on the ability of women to earn a living (Ehlers and Main 437). Furthermore, microenterprise programs make no attempt to confront the practical socioeconomic problems that women

face and in fact, encourage women to engage in “undercapitalized, small-scale businesses that maintain economic vulnerability and social peripheralization in a gender-biased world,” (Ehlers and Main 438).

Despite all of these short-comings, I want to argue that there is a solution to these failures of microenterprise. The solution is not necessarily innovative, but involves a reframing of the issue, and that is to evaluate women’s microbusinesses not so much in terms of market criteria, but rather in terms of social contributions. A significant portion of the evaluative literature on microenterprises in South Africa and America, as well in countries such as India, Latin and South America, employ masculinist standards by which to judge the successful, on unsuccessfulness, of the business. These standards stress “conquering the market and growth” over other important factors such as an improvement in women’s social position, her self-esteem and their household income (Grasmuck and Espinal 236). Furthermore, it seems important that a distinct sector of any given economy be judged not in relation to the larger, macro-economy, but judged by standards within which the sector exists. In other words, “a sector that is generally recognized as distinct for the way production and consumption are integrated within it should be analyzed in terms of its impact on household dynamics. And this assessment of the impact on household relations should be part of any overall evaluation of success or failure. Yet this is rarely the case,” (Grasmuck and Espinal 236).

Additionally, the ultimate goal of microenterprise is, in theory at least, empowerment, with education and development secondary. However obvious, but what should be of note, is the word power within the word empowerment. Employing a feminist lens lends itself to an analysis of the root and action of the word, which is power,

and using that lens to conclude that power difference is the basis of unequal gender relations (Staudt, Rai and Parpart 1251). Therefore, I argue that the rhetorical and discursive construct that microenterprise is framed in, should change to reflect more accurately the purpose and goals of the economic system. For, one of the parts of the feminist vision is the deconstruction of patriarchy, and of course its ruling ideology of an economic system that prioritizes profits over people. And in line with feminist theorists such as Mary Daly and Julia Kristeva, the deconstruction process may begin with colloquial discourse.

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