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Global Mamas or Local Mamas: Analyzing the Effectiveness of Consumption at Alleviating Poverty

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Global Mamas or Local Mamas: Analyzing the Effectiveness of
Consumption at Alleviating Poverty

Introduction

The idea for this research was born during a study abroad experience in Ghana, West Africa in the fall of 2009. Like many foreign travelers in the country, my fellow students and I were overwhelmed by the beauty of the arts in Ghana. We went out of our way to pursue them whenever we could. We were excited to find, therefore, an organization in Cape Coast that catered exactly to our needs. At Global Mamas we could buy handmade goods dyed and sewn by women in Ghana and we knew the proceeds of our purchases would be used to help pull those women and their families out of poverty. The stories we were being told were compelling and persuasive. One student on our program even spent her four-week independent study time researching Global Mamas and concluded that it was a good example of the way forward in terms of Ghanaian development. I admit to being roped into feeling good about my purchases from Global Mamas. It is effective with its marketing. However, I developed a healthy amount of skepticism about the simplicity of narratives and its methods. It is that simplicity that I investigate further in this paper.

Rena Adam and Kristin Johnson met in Ghana in 1992, where they were serving as Peace Corps volunteers working on projects to empower women in nearby

communities. When their tenure was up, both women returned to the United States to pursue MBAs and subsequent careers in the business world. During this time, they both maintained connections with the women they'd met in Ghana and volunteered their time finding markets abroad for those women to sell their batik work. Noticing the positive impact that their limited volunteer hours had on the livelihoods of those few Ghanaian women, after eight years Adam and Johnson took the necessary steps to create the non-profit, Women in Progress, selling products under the name Global Mamas. Adam relocated to Ghana and started the organization there, while Johnson remained in the United States and worked on identifying markets for Global Mamas products. The organization was registered as a local non-governmental organization (NGO) in Ghana in 2002 and as an international NGO in 2003 (WIP Women in Progress 2002) (Dold 2009).

Global Mamas now functions as a network of individual small businesses run by women in Ghana that sell their products in global markets under a common brand name and have access to business growth resources through Women in Progress. It's created 272 new jobs for 464 women in Ghana (ASPECKS 2009). The female producers receive 30% of the annual revenue from the 175 different products that Global Mamas sells. In good years, they earn up to ten times the amount that the average Ghanaian makes in a year.

Global Mamas markets its products with a strong alternative consumption narrative. Its website is ripe with language emphasizing all the good that will come from purchasing Global Mamas merchandise. Its mission, for example, states, "Global Mamas reduces the economic inequality of women by significantly increasing the revenues and profits of woman-owned businesses in Africa. This in turn increases employee wages, generates new jobs and improves the standard of living. We believe that helping women gain economic independence is the most effective way to reduce dependence on foreign

aid and steadily create a prosperous society” (WIP Global Mamas 2010). Further, they pose the following statement to their customers: “By purchasing Global Mamas products, you are offering sustainable livelihoods to women and their families living in poverty” (WIP Global Mamas 2010). These, and other examples of the alternative consumption narrative posed by Global Mamas, form the basis of analysis about Global Mamas’ effectiveness at developing both its producers and its consumers.

At a very small scale, (the scale of the individual, in fact), Global Mamas is developing its producers in the way in which it claims. Women in Ghana are in fact generating a steady income and becoming more and more capable of supporting their families. But at a larger scale, the assumptions that Global Mamas makes about the role of consumption in alleviating poverty and the market system within which it works actually reinforce wealth gaps between the Global South and the Global North. In a situation in which the consumer ‘needs’ new clothes, for example, buying from Global Mamas is a better option than a conventional alternative. But Global Mamas walks a fine line between being a better choice for consumers and explicitly promoting unnecessary consumption, which is not sustainable at the global scale or for the women producing their goods.

Methods

A number of different methods were utilized in this research. The overarching framework for approaching my analysis was to take Global Mamas’ own description of itself and break it down into the different claims it is making. Their description states:

“Global Mamas is a non-profit and fair trade organization assisting women in Africa to become economically independent. By purchasing Global Mamas products, you are offering sustainable livelihoods to women and their families

living in poverty. All proceeds go directly to the women and to the non-profit programs that assist them with business development” (WIP Global Mamas 2010).

The claims highlighted in this statement are related to poverty, women, consumption, individualization, and sustainability and they will be addressed in that order.

In order to analyze these claims a variety of methods were necessary. First, personal experience, both in Ghana and at the Midtown Global Market in Minneapolis, Minnesota contributed to my understanding of the narratives that Global Mamas uses on its consumers. Additionally, I rely heavily on the research my fellow student conducted while we were in Ghana together. She was able to spend time with some of Global Mamas’ producers and interview them, as well as contact other Global Mamas employees. As a study that offers very little criticism of the organization, her work serves as an effective contrast to this research.

I was able to use a few consumer accounts, related to Fair Trade and specifically to Global Mamas, to provide further evidence of others’ acceptance of the organization. These pieces worked nicely with general articles about Global Mamas to create a thorough understanding of how Global Mamas is generally received. This understanding provided further evidence for analysis.

Academic literature related to alternative consumption, and especially Fair Trade narratives, was used not only to provide context for this study, but also to frame my analysis of Global Mamas’ claims. Raymond L. Bryant and Michael K. Goodman’s piece, “Consuming narratives: the political ecology of ‘alternative consumption” (2003), was particularly formative in terms of providing a framework for analysis. Using similar methods to those used by Bryant and Goodman, I was able to critically look at Global Mamas’ language, images, stories, and store atmosphere.

Finally, Bryant and Goodman's focus on political ecology highlighted the importance of that sub-discipline in my analysis. By one definition, political ecology is an understanding of the "complex relations between nature and society through a careful analysis of what one might call the forms of access and control over resources and their implications for environmental health and sustainable livelihoods" (Watts 2000; cited in Robbins 2002). As a discipline, political ecology has two components: critique of dominant approaches to human-environment interactions and documentation of the ways in which individuals and groups cope with change and unite for action (Robbins 2002). The research presented here focuses mostly on critique of dominant understandings of consumption, but brings in pieces of the second component in the 'Policy Recommendations' section.

Political ecology has three key concepts that it explores through a variety of methods: marginalized communities, a broadly defined political economy, and chains of explanation (Robbins 2002). While all of these concepts have informed my research, I focus on the concept of chains of explanation because it relates most explicitly to the commodity chain of Global Mamas products. Like many political ecological works, this research explores issues of discourse and scale in analyzing the claims presented by Global Mamas.

Context in the Literature

There is an abundance of literature on the rise of alternative consumption, which is consumption through which consumers attempt to 'make a difference' (Bryant and Goodman 2003). Common examples include 'organic,' 'local,' and 'Fair Trade' products that tell consumers something about the conditions under which the products were produced. Bryant and Goodman's "Consuming narratives" (2003) is particularly

formative literature on this topic, especially from the political ecological perspective. They conclude that alternative consumption is a weak form of social and political action because it fails to question the acceptance of consumption as the basic form of action (Bryant and Goodman 2003).

The political ecological techniques used by Bryant and Goodman are essential to the framework of the research presented here. But this paper seeks to expand their discussion in a number of ways. First, it highlights an organization selling Fair Trade products other than food, an anomaly in this particular body of literature. Second, Global Mamas focuses exclusively on women, both in their development scheme and their marketing. This focus provides an additional level of analysis not typically explored in literature about alternative discussion. Finally, because of the availability of consumer accounts of purchases through Global Mamas, this paper is able to extend the discussion of alternative consumption as a way of developing the consumer, rather than just the producer.

Goodman wrote an additional piece, entitled “Reading fair trade: political ecological imaginary and the moral economy of fair trade foods” (2004). In this article he explores the moral dimensions of Fair Trade purchases and suggests areas for further study and improvement. His analysis and suggestions have significantly informed the analysis presented here, but it is hoped that his arguments are deepened through the use of a specific case study. Conclusively, I incorporate some of his suggestions in generating policy recommendations for Global Mamas.

Findings

Perceptions of Poverty

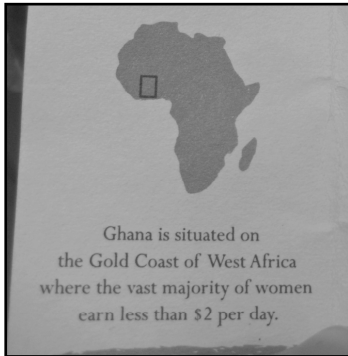


Figure 1: Part of the standard tag on Global Mamas products. *Photo by author.*

One of the claims that Global Mamas makes in its description of itself is its intention to alleviate poverty for women and their families. On the surface, it appears a worthy goal. But it raises multiple questions when examined more closely. Specifically, it brings into question exactly how poverty is being defined and, therefore, what it means to alleviate it.

In the description, Global Mamas does not define poverty in any way. Even when thoroughly exploring the literature on their website, little to nothing is found relating to what impoverishment looks like for the women the organization is working with. The closest Global Mamas comes to defining poverty is a tag on some of their products that says that most women in Ghana live on less than \$2 per day (see Figure 1).

Even this definition, as specific as it is, does not say much about how impoverished these women are. It does not indicate if their husbands bring in additional money that makes it possible to get the things they need. It doesn't put that amount in a Ghanaian context by explaining how much \$2 per day can actually buy. The consumer is, therefore, left with only his or her own experience through which to understand that definition, and, by Western standards, \$2 per day is not sufficient to get the things one needs to survive.

This example is representative of Fair Trade organizations in general. Because most of them are based in North America, they tend to adopt Western understandings of poverty in order to address problems. This adoption is understandable, given the varying definitions of poverty and the fact that it changes based on context.

But let's assume that living on \$2 per day is equated with severe poverty in the Ghanaian context. Are the women that Global Mamas is serving living within that definition? The tag indicates only that most women live that way. The following is the biography of one of the women employed by Global Mamas:

Florence Thompson has been a seamstress for 20 years. She believes that Ghanaian customers know a good seamstress by the amount of work she already has, so Florence prides herself on gaining new customers by always keeping herself and her four apprentices busy. Before joining the Global Mamas cooperative, Florence struggled to get enough work to start her own business and to support her growing family, and her electricity had been cut off for three months. Now Florence continues to create unique clothing and improve the neatness and quality of her work. She has learned book-keeping, and stays on track so that she knows exactly how her business is doing. From her success with Global Mamas, Florence has started paying off a loan that she had defaulted on for two years. (WIP Global Mamas 2010)

Florence could not sustain her own business prior to working for Global Mamas. By Western standards, in fact, her conditions sound pretty glum indeed. However, a growing family and a lack of electricity are not anomalies in the Ghanaian context. Such things are a part of many Ghanaians' everyday lives. Additionally, if Florence was looking to start her own business, it is likely that she had enough work to her sustain herself to some extent at least. While by Western standards this may equate with poverty, there are many Ghanaians who would be happy to have work at all, and starting their own business is a pipe dream.

Florence's story, too, is one of the more unfortunate. Take the following contrary example:

Jennifer has been batiking for eight years in the local Cape Coast area. Jennifer learned the trade from ITTU (Intermediate Technology Transfer Unit) where she

became a certified Batikker. She has enjoyed being part of the Global Mama Organization since June 2007. Since joining Global Mamas, Jennifer's business, JB Peocin, has been very busy. It has grown to the point where she needs two part-time workers to assist with the high batiking demands she receives. Jennifer also sells her cloth at the local market but hopes to expand her business even more. When Jennifer is not busy at work, which is very rare, she loves to spend her time watching films and playing Ludo (an African board game). (WIP Global Mamas 2010)

Jennifer's story contains few elements that one might associate with stereotypical Third World poverty. She was batiking before she began working for Global Mamas. There is no indication that her livelihood suffered prior to her involvement, just that it became more successful and "very busy" after her incorporation into the Global Mamas network. Interestingly, this short biography also indicates that Jennifer is able to participate in some leisure activities. Such activities are generally part of a more privileged lifestyle.

Another example will serve to emphasize the discrepancy between stereotypical poverty and the circumstances in which Global Mamas' women live:

Gina is a busy batikker, she not only batiks for the Global Mama Organization, but she also teaches batiking at a local high school where she has taught hundreds of girls her batiking techniques. Gina has trained seven apprentices in her batiking trade. Gina is also a skilled weaver. However, she has not been weaving lately because of the high demand for her batiking skills. Gina hopes to one day expand her business to an established factory. Gina wishes to eventually retire back home to the Volta region in Ghana. When Gina is not working, she enjoys reading and spending time with her husband and four children. (WIP Global Mamas 2010)

In addition to the mention of leisure activities, a sign of relative well-being, Gina, like Jennifer, does not rely entirely on Global Mamas for her livelihood. Because she has work on the side, (teaching at a local high school), she is likely not completely impoverished, by Ghanaian standards. However, the amount that she works in order to

sustain herself is likely impressive to Western consumers, thereby receiving their sympathy.

Building Connection

The biographies of Jennifer and Gina cited above highlight the connection that Global Mamas attempts to build between its consumers and its producers. By emphasizing the aspects of the producers' lives that consumers can best relate to, they entice consumers to buy products because customers feel as if they are 'caring at a distance' (Lebel and Lorek 2008).

Although the lives of women in Ghana and women in North America and Europe are vastly different in a lot of ways, the biographies of the women working for Global Mamas place extreme emphasis on the similarities between their lives. In Jennifer's biography, for example, she is described as enjoying leisure activities such as watching movies and playing board games. For consumers that can't relate to her expanding business, knowing this seemingly irrelevant fact about her life serves to forge a connection between the consumer and the woman who made the product he or she is buying.

Gina's biography further emphasizes this connection. It describes plans to retire and enjoyment of reading and spending time with her husband and children. While a consumer can't necessarily relate to Gina's expanded business opportunities through Global Mamas, Western women are likely to be interested in retiring some day, reading for pleasure, and spending time with their families. Further, many women in the United States and Europe may even be able to relate to Jennifer and Gina in regards to their business initiatives.

By connecting producers and consumers on the basis of assumed universally shared values, (family, marriage, children, income, economic independence), consumers are

made to feel a sense of solidarity with the producers they're supporting in Ghana. Buying a good with a woman's name handwritten on the tag, (see Figure 2), is a logical way to show they appreciate that solidarity. Global Mamas highlights similarities between their consumers and producers in order to rouse sympathy in the consumer that will encourage them to buy more to address the difference in their relative wealth.

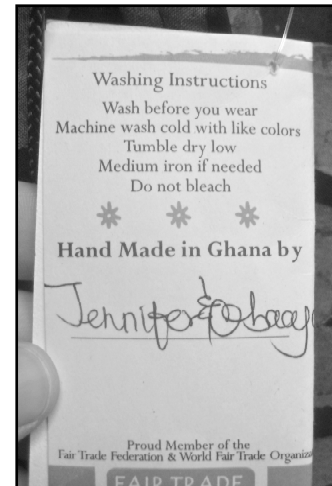


Figure 2: A tag on all Global Mamas products with the signed names of the women who made the product. *Photo by author.*

Female Empowerment

The overarching theme of the connection that Global Mamas builds is that of female empowerment, and a focus on women is clear in the organization's description of itself. Figure 3 is an image from the Women in Progress website, which is a partner organization of Global Mamas. It demonstrates Global Mamas' assumption that women are considered the "weaker sex" in the countries of both their consumers and their producers. This assumption implies that Global Mamas views women's empowerment as a universal value. But gender relations, like many other things, are drastically different in different places. It would require extensive further evidence about such relations to assume a similarity between the role of women's empowerment in the First World and its role in the Third World.

Still, Global Mamas founds its work on this idea of female empowerment. First,



Figure 3: An image from the Global Mamas website. www.globalmamas.org

the founders believe that helping women gain economic independence is the key to reducing dependence on foreign aid (APSECKS 2009). Foreign aid usually goes

through the hands of the government and takes significantly more time and effort to reach the people it would be most useful in helping. Similarly, Global Mamas believes that empowering women is the key to eradicating poverty (Feth 2009). This belief is based on the founders' understanding that "women are the heart of the family, so by helping women you can be sure that the money will go back into the family" (Schleifer 2005).

These notions are the reasoning behind Global Mamas' emphasis on women's livelihoods. The organization promotes female-run businesses through connection to the global market and business improvement programs (WIP Global Mamas 2010). Men, in fact, are almost entirely excluded from the organization, it seems. On the "Meet the Women" page on the Global Mamas website there are two men listed as bead makers for the organization. They are not highlighted or even recognized differently and, in fact, they probably go largely unnoticed given the title of the page. This reality is representative of Global Mamas' focus on women's livelihoods.

From the product pages a focus on female consumers is also notable. While Global Mamas does sell some men's clothing, the selection is limited and there are no pictures of men wearing the clothing shown on the website. In contrast, there are an abundance of different styles for women and their children, displayed dominantly on multiple pages of the website.

The void of men on the website emphasizes Global Mamas' understanding of female empowerment as a universal value. By focusing their website on the women it is working with, Global Mamas attempts to connect with those consumers who also see female empowerment as a key way to improve the lives of people around the world, regardless of the specific nature of gender relations in the place where work is being done. Ironically, Global Mamas' understanding of the importance of women is somewhat

undermined by even its small inclusion of men on its website. Take the biography of Steven “Kofi” Djabanor, for example:

Djabanor, a Sabrino village native, has been working in his family bead-making business for over 25 years, following in the footsteps of his grandparents, his parents and his siblings. Djabanor works alongside his wife, who also partakes in the family business, and describes bead making as a lengthy process, a skill which he learned at the age of 12. You must first grind glass bottles into fine powder, then color the powder with various dyes and carefully layer the colored powder within the bead molds. Djabanor says the beauty of the bead is within the color combinations of the glass, it is no wonder that Global Mamas loves his beads! But with having to support his retired parents, his brother's children and five children of his own, Djabanor takes the utmost consideration when preparing beads for his sole customer, Global Mamas (WIP Global Mamas 2010).

Djabanor’s biography highlights many of the same values highlighted in the previously cited biographies. He inherited a family business and works closely with his wife, emphasizing the importance of family to him. Additionally, the biography indicates that Djabanor is using the money to support his family, not just himself. At least in this case the founders’ assumption that when money is put in the hands of women it will stay in the family. In Djabanor’s case, putting money in the hands of a man is also keeping the money within the family.

In addition to providing little information about the actual nature of gender relations in Ghana and how they relate to poverty, Global Mamas actually provides some evidence that men can also be helpful agents in the eradication of poverty. While it would take significantly more research to indicate whether or not female empowerment is actually the key to poverty eradication, this evidence brings into question whether that assumption is a worthwhile basis on which to found an organization. Still, Global

Mamas' focus on female empowerment creates a key connection between their producers and their consumers that allows their organization to thrive.

A Guilt-free Purchase

The connection that is created between producers and consumers through the stories that Global Mamas tells about its producers is key to encouraging the consumption that keeps the organization alive. A focus on consumption is another claim made in the organization's description of itself. Because consumers feel some solidarity with the women who produce Global Mamas' goods, they feel good about the purchases they make through the organization.

“Somehow, through the often despised medium of commerce, we are part of a movement attempting to bring social justice to the whole world,” says Nicholas Gould (2003). His personal account of his experience purchasing Fair Trade goods highlights the key way in which consumers benefit from making alternative consumption choices, like buying Global Mamas products: it feels like part of a greater cause. The acquisition of such a good is not very significant in and of itself; indeed, it is really just another material item that could have come from any conventional retailer. But the narrative that surrounds the good makes it unique within the greater global market. By portraying producers as disadvantaged compared to Western consumers, Fair Trade marketing promotes consumption decisions that make consumers feel like they are making a difference by spending their money in a particular way.

For consumers like Gould, this notion of making a difference seems to be very real. He's not alone. Mara Dold (2009) writes, “The idea that the Global Mamas label encompasses both fair trade and non-profit characteristics not only makes the purchase that much more desirable but also, as I have felt firsthand, guilt-free as the women

benefit directly from the consumption of their beautiful handicrafts.” Dold goes on to say that it’s “merchandise with a conscience,” similar to Kirsten Hawkins (2005) assertion that Global Mamas sells “style with conscience.”

These accounts of personal pleasure from buying Global Mamas goods reflect the Fair Trade notion that consumers can shop and save the world at the same time. In fact, the growth of Fair Trade in recent years is said to reflect expanding social awareness and activism (Lebel and Lorek 2008). While consumption is sometimes criticized for being a contributor to environmental degradation and a barrier to sustainability, the recent rise in alternative consumption can be seen as an “arena for the creative involvement of people” (Gould 2003). In fact, despite its inherent problems, consumption might be considered a way for “people of conscience” to bridge the gap between their values and their practices (Maniates 200b). Through the notion of ‘caring at a distance,’ consumers justify their purchases of clothing and accessories that they don’t necessarily need because their purchase is supposedly helping someone else. Rather than the guilt that is associated with current problematization of consumption, consumers actually feel good about consuming.

Individualization of Responsibility

The consumption that Global Mamas promotes by creating a connection between producers and consumers puts the responsibility for poverty alleviation in the hands of individual consumers. Michael Maniates, in his essay “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?,” terms this idea the ‘individualization of responsibility’ (2002a). Individualization of responsibility fails to acknowledge the larger systems at work in the world and therefore undermines individuals’ ability to address problems at their roots.

In the case of Global Mamas, this notion means that the organization is failing to think critically about both the global market within which it works and the causes of poverty that may be affecting their work, besides the promotion of women's livelihoods. By putting the responsibility of poverty alleviation in the hands of the consumers who buy its products, Global Mamas also impairs its consumers' abilities to think critically about those same systems. Consumers are left with a sense that their consumption can solve faraway problems, without any thought to how those systems might need to change in order for problems like poverty to truly be solved.

Developing the Consumer?

If this individualization of responsibility developed the consumers' understanding of issues like poverty or even Ghanaian culture, then an argument could be made in favor of consumption. But Global Mamas products represent very little of Ghanaian culture, as the styles and symbols are created especially for a Western market. In the store, information about the producers is overpowered by the products themselves and is sometimes even physically hidden behind them. The consumer, therefore, can buy something and leave the store with little knowledge beyond what they would have received at any other store. What information is given on the product tags is simplified and broad.

While the women producing Global Mamas products are using traditional methods to create them, (batik and handmade glass beads, for example), the products themselves are not representative of those worn or used by Ghanaians. Rather than traditional symbols seen on Ghanaian clothing, Global Mamas products display symbols with which Westerners will be more familiar, like animals and boats. More surprising

still is the fact that Global Mamas makes winter coats, the likes of which would never be worn or needed in Ghana.

The store itself doesn't provide much information either. While there are pictures of Ghanaian women in picture holders and on posters on the walls, many of them lack any further information about those women. Additionally, the posters that do provide some sense of where the women are coming from and how Global Mamas is impacting their lives are often hard to read or even physically hidden behind the products themselves (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Stories of the women are physically hidden behind the products being sold. *Photo by author.*

This reality reflects the founders' pride in the products themselves as a marketing tool. They "are beautiful and sell themselves," the founders say, highlighting the importance of selling the products over sharing the stories of previously impoverished women.

Even on the product tags, which consumers are more likely to read because they go home with them, the information shared is pretty vague. The standard tag on Global Mamas products, (see Figure 5), provides some sense of where in the world Ghana is located, the definition of poverty discussed above, a statement to consumers about the

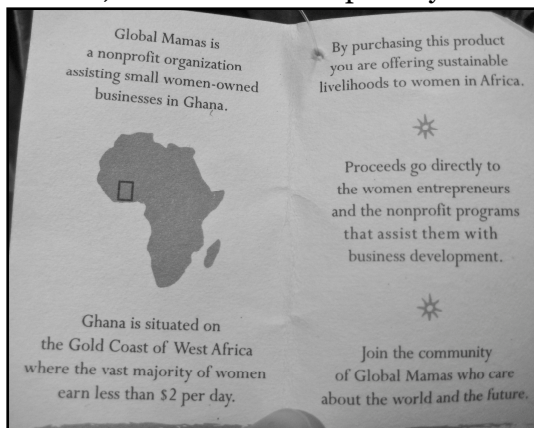


Figure 5: The tag found on all Global Mamas products. *Photo by author.*

positive impact they're having by buying the product, and a sweeping statement about the scale of change that Global Mamas is supporting.

These examples highlight Global Mamas failure to develop their consumers in any way. They provide beautiful products for

sale that make consumers feel good about spending their money, but because the information the organization provides does little to develop the consumer's understanding of the world around him or her, Global Mamas can be charged with promoting the problematic individualization of responsibility.

Significance of Increased Income

Despite the problems outlined above, evidence indicates that Global Mamas is, in fact, making some positive change at the local scale in Ghana. The organization has expanded to include 464 women, all of whom are living much more comfortable lives than they were prior to their involvement with Global Mamas (ASPECKS 2009). In fact, the 'global mamas' working for the organization make up to ten times the amount of the average Ghanaian in a year (Schleifer 2005). Further, as the businesswomen become more successful, they are able to hire other women to work for them, thus creating a ripple effect of the organization's positive impact (Dold 2009). However, the significance of this increase in income can also be brought into question.

First, as Sein S. Kipusi (2010) says, "ethical purchase of a fair trade handbag may enable the women to provide education for their children, yet what quality of education?" The question here is about the infrastructure in Ghana that may contribute to the 'global mamas' impoverishment, but is not being addressed by the organization. Their increased income allows women to provide education and food for their families. But if the structures aren't in place in Ghana to provide quality education and quality food to its citizens, increased income cannot solve those problems.

Second, if a small group of women are now earning significantly more than they were before, and ten times what most of the people around them are earning, it is questionable whether Global Mamas is eradicating poverty or just creating a small,

wealthy upper class of women. Such a class living at a particular comfort level makes the poor feel poorer by comparison. Because, as was discussed earlier, poverty seems to be defined relatively, the creation of a wealthier class does not really alleviate the poverty problem in Ghana.

Perpetuating a Wealth Gap

A similar wealth gap to the one potentially being created within Ghana already exists between Global Mamas' producers and consumers and is perpetuated by the organization. Consumers considering a Fair Trade purchase are in a place of significant privilege even within the developed world, given the cost and availability of such products (Kipusi 2010). Because Global Mamas relies on an international market with inherent unequal power structures, it can do little to address the injustices of wealth distribution in the world.

By enlisting customers to help them in their mission to alleviate poverty, in fact, Global Mamas is actually perpetuating those unequal power relations between consumers and producers (Bryant and Goodman 2004). Some of the items they sell, for example, seem to serve only to highlight the privilege of the consumer (Kipusi 2010). Batik dog backpacks, for example, would never be used in Ghana, but are available for purchase by Westerners. These products are available because consumers have the luxury to spend money on things they don't need, because their basic needs are already taken care of.

According to Maniates (2002b), "satisfaction with one's material life is significantly influenced by how much one spends relative to others." In the increasingly globalized world within which Global Mamas operates, Maniates statement means that the poor producers likely feel poorer by comparison to the consumers. Because of the

relativity of poverty, especially at the global scale, such a sentiment brings into question whether poverty can really be alleviated through any system that highlights the wealth gaps between people in different parts of the world.

Proximate Versus Ultimate Cause

Many of the inadequacies of Global Mamas as highlighted above are related to its focus on the proximate rather than the ultimate cause of poverty. One key concept used by political ecologists is that of chains of explanation, which seek to place local and regional problems in a broader context (Robbins 2004). Rather than placing poverty in a broader context, Global Mamas addresses it at the level of the individual. At that scale, the cause of poverty may look very simply like a lack of income. This cause of poverty is the proximate cause. If the poverty of the individuals that Global Mamas works with were to be placed in a broader context, it may become clear why these women lack income as well as what other barriers might exist to them living the quality of life they should be. The causes of poverty that become clear in this broader context are the ultimate causes of poverty.

In its description of itself, Global Mamas doesn't provide any cause of poverty at all. It is only in its actions that one can decipher the cause of poverty that the organization is attempting to address. There are two possible reasons for this discrepancy. One is that the founders of Global Mamas have not thought in very much depth about the problem they want to solve. Rather than think beyond the women they are working with, they identified a problem and went about solving it without giving any explanation to its true cause.

The other reason could be that the founders purposely left a cause of poverty out of their description because "once a finger can be pointed at who is to blame it leaves the

organization more vulnerable to question the testability of its claims” (Kipusi 2010). In order to maintain business and continue to create the small-scale change that they are, Global Mamas may need to leave some information out of its publicity so as not to be vulnerable to potentially harmful criticism.

Regardless of the exact reason, the inadequacy lies in Global Mamas focus on a proximate cause rather than an ultimate cause of poverty. Because of their failure to address the root of the problem they are trying to solve, this flaw brings into question the sustainability of Global Mamas impact.

The Global Market

Ironically, Global Mamas depends on a system that may be considered an ultimate cause of poverty in some parts of the world: the global market. This market reflects historical and contemporary power structures (Moseley 2009), which relate to issues of wealth gaps and inequality discussed above. But this reliance on international markets also challenges Global Mamas’ claim that the livelihoods it provides for women in Ghana are sustainable.

The question is raised by Kipusi (2010) whether Fair Trade producers will ever be in a position to not need Fair Trade. While Global Mamas claims to provide sustainable livelihoods and prides itself on “help[ing] women to help themselves” (Dold 2009), as long as the women depend on a fluctuating global market to sustain their incomes, they can never be entirely economically independent.

In economically difficult times, when consumers are forced to choose between products, they are unlikely to choose the more expensive Fair Trade item over the cheaper conventional product. Additionally, if any significant part of the global market stops demanding Global Mamas goods, and other similar products, the women

producing those products will no longer have anyone to supply them to. Their business will inevitably suffer. These challenges are part of the reality of working in an alternative way within a larger system.

Scale of Change

In its name, product tags, and website, Global Mamas claims to be working at a number of different scales. Its name indicates a global scale. The description it provides for itself claims that it assists women in Africa (WIP Global Mamas 2010). And on its standard product tag it provides information about the location of Ghana. The reality is that Global Mamas relies on a global system to make small-scale change within Ghana. While that change is significant for the few women who experience it, the system within which the organization works is flawed enough to undermine that change at any other scale.

Despite its name, Global Mamas is really not very 'global' at all. While it does work within this global market system in order to help women in Ghana sell the products that they make, it does little to change that system. The scale of the change the organization is creating is focused entirely on the individual at both ends of the producer-consumer chain. Individual producers in Ghana benefit from better working conditions, increased wages, and opportunities to expand their businesses and employ more women. Consumers benefit from the peace of mind of knowing that they've contributed to these improved circumstances for women in Ghana.

While I in no way want to depreciate the value of positive change at a very small scale, there are two criticisms to be made of the scale of change Global Mamas is advocating. One is the discrepancy between the scale of change that they market through words like "African" and "global" and the sweeping generalizations they make about the

change occurring. The other criticism is a recognition of the powerful position that Global Mamas is in to make larger change. As a successful small-scale Fair Trade non-profit business operating within the global market system, if Global Mamas made small changes to better understand the complexity of the problems it is trying to address, and then conveyed those understandings to its customers, it could serve as a model organization for creating broader change. The importance of small-scale change does not need to get lost, but it becomes somewhat devalued when its purpose does not extend to larger scales.

If poverty alleviation was blanket across Ghana then female entrepreneurs could market their products locally, in a more sustainable system that reinforced equity in livelihoods rather than gaps in wealth distribution. This would require a more comprehensive method for addressing poverty. It would also require a more complex understanding of poverty itself.

Conclusion

Global Mamas, as a Fair Trade, non-profit organization, attempts to alleviate poverty by providing sustainable livelihoods to businesswomen in Ghana. Without clearly defining the poverty the organization is attempting to address, Global Mamas uses stories about its producers to generate a connection between its producers and consumers. This connection is based on a notion of female empowerment, which the founders of Global Mamas believe is the key to eradicating poverty, despite a lack of portrayed understanding of gender relations in Ghana

Despite the void of clarity in its founding ideas, Global Mamas successfully connects consumers to producers and makes them feel good about the effect of their purchases on women living in poverty. Unfortunately, this individualizes the

responsibility for poverty alleviation and undermines consumers' abilities to address problems like poverty at their roots. If the individualization of responsibility developed the consumers understanding of the world in some way, then Global Mamas' promotion of consumption might be justified, but consumers' shopping experiences are dominated by the products themselves, not the stories behind them, undermining the usefulness of these narratives.

Global Mamas is responsible for improvements in the lives of many women in Ghana. But even this positive change is questionable because of the larger structures that are not being addressed and the wealth gap it may be creating within Ghana. The wealth gap within Ghana would not be significantly different than the wealth gap that already exists globally, which Global Mamas perpetuates by selling products that highlight the privilege of their consumers.

The criticisms made of Global Mamas stem primarily from its focus on proximate causes of poverty, rather than ultimate causes. This flaw challenges its claim to provide sustainable livelihoods to women in Ghana because ultimately the organization is reliant on a global system that perpetuates poverty and is constantly in flux. The discrepancy between the problems Global Mamas is trying to solve at the scale of individuals and the solutions it provides that depend on systems at the global scale is the primary cause of the criticism provided here.

The simple labels and narratives employed by Global Mamas don't encourage in-depth thinking on the part of the consumer, which narrows individuals' understanding of the world, making it difficult to address problems like poverty at their roots.

Policy Recommendations

This paper is not intended to serve as a criticism of consumption. While problematic in many ways, and decidedly not the preferred method for alleviating poverty, consumption itself is not inherently bad. In fact, the human suffering that Global Mamas is trying to eradicate is the result of a lack of goods. What impoverished women in Ghana really need is more consumption (Miller 2001). However, the consumption in this case is being done by those who do not suffer from a lack of goods and, in fact, are in a position of privilege that allows them to buy things beyond what they need.

This paper is also not intended to problematize Global Mamas beyond what is fair criticism. Although a critical analysis of the narratives the organization presents highlights many problems with Global Mamas, the reality is that it does a lot of good for the women with whom it works. Because of its positive impact at the local scale in Ghana, there is no doubt that consumers should choose to buy Global Mamas products over a conventional alternative when the choice exists. Despite working within some inherently flawed systems and failing to address poverty at its roots, Global Mamas still has significantly less impact than organizations with no intention of improving the lives of its producers.

There are also limitations to what Global Mamas can do to address the criticisms brought forth here. A single organization alone cannot serve all the poor women in Ghana, let alone the vast numbers of people around the world that could benefit from such support. Nor can it significantly alter the infrastructural systems within Ghana that may also be contributing to the impoverishment of women there. It will also never be able to make a dent in the inherent unequal power structures that exist in the global

market within which Global Mamas works. These problems are larger than the scope of any one organization.

However, the criticisms of Global Mamas brought forth above are still legitimate. Rather than call for a limitation on Global Mamas' influence, as might be expected given the above challenges, I would like to suggest the expansion of Global Mamas' mission.

In the bottom right corner of the standard tag on its products, Global Mamas gives the following message to its consumers: "Join the community of global mamas who care about the world and the future." This statement could be criticized in the same way that the organization's description of itself was broken down and the various claims were analyzed. Rather than reiterate those criticisms, I simply encourage Global Mamas to heed its own advice.

Fair Trade only accounts for 0.01% of world trade, but its influence is growing (Lee 2006). That growth could be significantly accelerated if organizations like Global Mamas formed a community of people that care about the world and future, (as they presumably do), and worked together to expand the market for Fair Trade products. Individual organizations can only have very limited influence when working within such a large system, but if all those individual organizations networked together to try to market collectively to consumers, their success would be exponentially greater.

Global Mamas should start by identifying other Fair Trade organizations operating within Ghana and work to share markets with them. Beyond Ghana, Global Mamas should look for organizations globally that sell Fair Trade products other than food, as the markets for food and other products are bound to be different.

By expanding into a Fair Trade network, Global Mamas and other similar organizations will be able to penetrate more deeply into the global market system and expand the sales of Fair Trade products generally. This expansion will begin to convert

Fair Trade products from an 'alternative' consumption option to a more conventional consumption option.

Beyond looking outward for improvement options, Global Mamas should also conduct some internal evaluation. Most simply, the organization should expand its inclusion of men. The men already employed by Global Mamas appear to be on board with the organization's mission, and there is little reason to assume that others wouldn't be as well. Rather than create a dichotomy between men and women, Global Mamas should encourage them to work together to address issues that are common across genders.

Moreover, the founders should look critically at the causes of the poverty they are trying to address and begin to think beyond the proximate solution they are currently providing. This suggestion is not intended to imply that Global Mamas should stop promoting female economic independence through business expansion. Rather, it suggests that Global Mamas has the capacity to do something more than that. In conducting such an analysis, the founders will likely find that broader systems in Ghana are also contributing to these women's poverty. By better understanding those causes, Global Mamas can work to partner with organizations that are working on improving education and/or food systems in Ghana, as examples. Such partnerships with similarly minded people will expand the quality and the quantity of Global Mamas positive impact.

Finally, Global Mamas should encourage its consumers to continue to think and evaluate their actions in regards to the individualization of their responsibility to help solve the world's problems. The organization could provide more information about their definition of poverty, the scale of their action, and the actual conditions of their producers through their website, the signs on their store walls, and the tags on their products. They have multiple outlets for getting information to consumers, and yet all of

it seems incomplete or oversimplified. Because Global Mamas products are beautiful enough to sell themselves, the organization can continue to have the positive impact it is having in Ghana, while simultaneously pushing consumers' thinking beyond proximate solutions. Global Mamas could serve as an empowering agent for producers and consumers alike.

By networking with other Fair Trade organizations, partnering with organizations addressing other components of poverty, and empowering its consumers to think in more depth about their impact, Global Mamas would more effectively expand the global community that cares about the world and the future.

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