

Micro-credit and Gendered Moral Economies: A Case Study of Micro-credit Cooperatives in  
Rural Mexico

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## Abstract

HOLLY WORTHEN: Micro-credit and Gendered Moral Economies: A Case Study of  
Micro-credit Cooperatives in Rural Mexico  
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Micro-credit programs, one of the most important development initiatives within the past decade, often target rural women in the Global South. While some hail micro-credit programs as a development panacea that promotes women's empowerment, others view it as a problematic form of capitalist expansion in an era of neoliberalism. Through a case study of micro-credit in rural Mexico, this article complicates both these views and uses the concept of gendered moral economies to understand the gendered complexities of micro-credit programs. Gendered moral economies emphasizes how gendered social relations are constitutive of economic relations. It serves as a framework to help analyze how gender norms both shape and are shaped by negotiations over the distribution of scarce resources. Examining how micro-credit comes to make sense to rural Mexican women, this study demonstrates that definitions of proper gendered behavior are a key site through which micro-credit programs are accepted or rejected.

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Within the past thirty years, millions of people, most of them women in the Global South, have received a new type of development assistance, micro-credit. As the number and reach of micro-credit programs increases, scholars and development practitioners have engaged in trying to understand their various effects. While most development practitioners seem to agree that giving credit to women has a greater impact on overall familial well-being than it would if it were given to men, debates have erupted regarding the gendered effects of the programs. In attempting to analyze the relationship between gender and micro-credit programs, scholars have tended to fall in to one of two schools of thought on the topic.<sup>1</sup> One school of thought contends that micro-credit has the potential to empower women. These scholars essentially argue that women's access to capital will grant them a degree of financial control, which will eventually enhance gender equality. The other school of thought argues that micro-credit programs serve as a type of disciplining apparatus. Often drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality, these scholars read micro-credit programs as part of the formation of neoliberal political and economic subjects who come to see themselves, rather than the state, as responsible for their economic well-being.

In this thesis, I draw on fieldwork conducted with rural Mexican women involved in micro-credit cooperatives to argue that both of these approaches to micro-credit are limited. In my research, I spoke with women who could be seen as "empowered" through micro-credit, who felt that through micro-credit cooperatives, they had gained the ability to speak

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<sup>1</sup> I am using school of thought here as an organizational tool to help understand some of the underlying conceptions about micro-credit in current scholarly literature. The categories I describe are necessarily incomplete and not meant to be exhaustive.

with confidence in their households and community. Likewise, I spoke with women (often the same women) who discussed how they were learning how to “work,” manage their money, and “get ahead” through market relations, ideas that could be seen as the production of new capitalist subjects. These different readings of micro-credit are problematic not because one excludes the other, but because they both rely on the idea of women as somehow external to the economy.<sup>2</sup> This is evident in the idea that both frameworks share: that through micro-credit, women will be “brought in” to the economy in a new way—be it “empowering” or “disciplining.” This conceptualization is limited because it fails to account for the *processes* of micro-credit, or the way in which gendered norms and economic norms form each other to make micro-credit meaningful in particular contexts. More importantly, frameworks using this logic cannot account for the nuance, complexity and contradictions I found in my fieldwork.

In this paper, I call for an examination of gender and micro-credit through the lens of what I call gendered moral economies. Gendered moral economies combines the rich tradition of moral economies from agrarian studies with feminist theoretical insights into the cultural construction of gender and sexuality. It allows us to examine how ideas of gender and economy both shape and are shaped by social norms regulating the distribution of scarce resources. Thus, in contrast with other approaches to micro-credit, it turns the focus away from the endpoint of micro-credit to the *processes* of micro-credit, and it allows us to examine how various power struggles shape the ways in which micro-credit comes to be understood and made meaningful in everyday life.

I begin this paper by discussing the history of micro credit and then examining what I call the “empowerment” and the “disciplinary” assessments of micro-credit. I then develop

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<sup>2</sup> See Fernando (2006) on how empowerment can be read as a type of capitalist disciplining

the concept of gendered moral economies and argue that it allows for a more complex understanding of micro-credit programs. Following this, I explore a case study from the state of Jalisco, Mexico, that illustrates how the concept of gendered moral economies can help illuminate the relationships between micro-credit programs and gender. I conclude with an overview of the way in which gendered moral economies can be applied to promote a better understanding of the, formations, implementations, and processes of micro-credit projects.

## **THE CONTEXT OF MICRO-CREDIT**

Although microfinance can be linked to various different “beginnings,” it is most commonly associated with the story of Muhammad Yunus and the founding of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. In 1976, Yunus, an economics professor trained in the United States, began to give out very small loans (his first loan was \$27 divided among 42 people) to villagers in the community of Jobra (Yunus, 2003). He had learned that these villagers were borrowing money from local moneylenders at extremely high rates for capital inputs into small enterprises, and that because of these high rates it was difficult for the borrowers to make any profit above a subsistence level. Yunus wanted to find a way to systematically lend money to the poor, but was not able to convince formal bankers to lend small amounts to clients unable to offer collateral. Yunus conceived of Grameen Bank, a bank for the poor, which since its inception has provided loans to 7.06 million borrowers, lending a grand total of 6.25 billion dollars.<sup>3</sup> Even more interesting, however, is that 97% of borrowers are women.

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<sup>3</sup> Grameen Bank website, Grameen Bank at a Glance, May 2007. For more detailed information, see <http://www.grameen-info.org/bank/>



A typical Grameen micro-credit cycle works like this: Grameen gathers together groups of five people, predominately women, who Grameen's "bicycle bankers" feel would have the ability to repay small loans. Loans are used to purchase items for various micro-enterprises, including among others small machinery, rickshaws, milk cows, and goats. Loans are given without collateral, and are repaid in weekly small installments throughout the year. They are first given to only two members of the group. Depending on how those members repay their loans over a six week period, credit is then extended to the entire group of five. Thus, peer pressure among group members serves as a type of loan collateral. When the loans are paid back, groups may apply for more.

Since this project began in Bangladesh, many others have followed suit, and the implementation of microfinance programs has increased worldwide since the 1980s. International events in the last decade, including the first ever micro-credit summit in 1997 and its follow up summit in 2006, and the designation of 2005 as the official "UN year of micro-credit," indicate the popularity of microfinance and demonstrate that microfinance initiatives are here to stay.<sup>4</sup> Many supporters of microfinance tout it as a development panacea, arguing that it is an excellent way to reach the poor in a financially sustainable way. The high rates of loan repayment (in the case of Grameen, 98%) are often taken as an indication of the poor borrower's ability to manage credit more successfully than large borrowers. In general, microfinance has challenged many common assumptions regarding lending and finance, and it is seen as a way for the poor to finally have access to markets (Armendáriz de Aghion and Morduch, 2005).

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.microcreditsummit.org/> and <http://www.yearofmicrocredit.org/> for more information

Understanding how and why microfinance has become so popular requires an awareness of the general economic and political climate in which microfinance has been conceptualized and supported. In general, the 1980s marked an important change in the perception of state involvement in development projects. This began with a shift in Great Britain (under Prime Minister Thatcher) and the United States (under President Reagan) away from a social democratic or “welfare” state toward what is commonly seen as neoliberal state system (for a detailed account, see Harvey, 2005).<sup>5</sup> This new neoliberal shift emphasized a cutback of state welfare, the privatization of public enterprises, and the promotion of free trade and foreign investment. This general shift not only influenced economic and political systems in the United States and the United Kingdom, but also re-defined the appropriate role of social welfare provision and economic structures in the Global South. The most obvious example of this is the case of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). Implemented in the 1980s by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), SAPs required that debt-strapped nations seeking IMF support adhere to strict guidelines including the implementation of key neoliberal agenda items including privatization, de-regulation, and opening of markets. Thus, third world nations seeking loans had to cut-back on numerous social welfare programs. It is especially noted that women were often the ones who bore the brunt of the opening of markets and the withdrawal of state support services (Benería and Feldman, 1992). Within this context of withdrawn state support from social welfare provisioning and the prominence of neoliberal economic and political ideals, development

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that many see the first neoliberal state as being that implemented in Chile with Pinochet’s coup of Allende. Pinochet was quick to implement neoliberal economic reforms as an alternative to Keynesianism, and many of his economic advisors were known as the “Chicago Boys” who studied with Milton Freedman at the University of Chicago (Harvey, 2005).

policies likewise changed course, as many development practitioners began to emphasize the intersection of the individual and the market as the site for development.

In 1987, however, the publication of Cornia et al's UNICEF study, *Adjustment with a Human Face* demonstrated the extremely difficult social cost of SAPs (Molyneux, 2006). As government officials began to realize that the social costs of SAPs might undermine the projects themselves, they began to take into consideration more social aspects of economic reforms. By the end of the decade, these concerns merged into a "new development agenda," referred to as the post-Washington Consensus. This agenda was still heavily guided by neoliberal policies but was also influenced by the popularity of the human rights discourse in the 1990s (Molyneux, 2002). Thus, a new focus on "bottom-up development" began, in which "Development practice was henceforth to be more consultative, more sensitive to the needs of the poor, the environment, ethnic minorities, women, and other who had been at the sharp end of it" (p.172). Fernando (1997) argues that micro-credit was able to fit both the neoliberal and human development requirement of the new development agenda: "these trends led international development agencies to search for new approaches to poverty alleviation that were politically and economically manageable in order to ensure smooth implementation of economic reforms. Micro-enterprises appeared as a win-win option that promised to advance the liberal ideology of private entrepreneurial capitalism and social mobilization based on multiple social identities" (p.158).

Within this new "post Washington consensus" framework, states were supposed to be slimmed down and de-centralized, but still active in development, while civil society, most notably non-governmental organizations (NGOs), were to take a more central role. While it is certain that direct financial support from the state has decreased, scholars caution against

seeing the rise of NGO's in development as a type of "retreat" of the state (Peck and Tickell, 2002). Rather, they argue that the current development situation is a new configuration of state power that still promotes the state's interests of establishing entrepreneurial citizens (Fernando, 2007). NGOs provide a key link between the state and citizens that allows for this "hands-off" neoliberal citizenship modeling to occur (Lazar, 2004; Fernando, 1997).<sup>6</sup>

An examination of the scholarly literature engaging with micro-credit demonstrates two main schools of thought, which I have labeled for convenience (albeit simplifying their arguments) as the "empowerment" and the "disciplinary" frameworks. The "empowerment" school aligns with main-stream development theory. While many are very critical of micro-credit programs, their work still indicates that they are committed to the idea that some type of development program, be it micro-credit or something else, can "get development right" and can likewise challenge oppressive gender relations. The second group of scholars, engaged in what I label the "disciplinary" school, rely more on critical development studies in their assessment of micro-credit. They tend to examine how micro-credit systems engage with the state, civil society, and the individual to create new forms of disciplinary power that promote certain kinds of subjectivities convenient to neoliberal ideology. Thus, this view is a much more skeptical approach to whether development can ever fulfill its promises.<sup>7</sup> In attempting to understand why neither set of literature can full account for the complexity of the ways in which gender and micro-credit interact on the ground, it is important to take into account both perspectives and examine where and how they contradict or overlap each other.

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<sup>6</sup> For an interesting discussion of how the idea of "social capital" and group-lending fit into the neoliberal framework, see Molyneux (2002).

<sup>7</sup> No doubt, this "school" is informed by the works of post-development thinkers, especially Escobar's *Encountering Development* (1994).

## EMPOWERMENT FRAMEWORKS

The work that engages with micro-credit as a potentially viable development intervention has engaged in a debate over whether micro-credit can serve as an effective tool for overcoming gender inequalities. Micro-credit initiatives challenged the world of gender and finance relations by extending for the first time to many poor women the ability to borrow money in an “official” way (for women’s use of informal credit, see Lazar 2004). Initial assessments indicated that women were not only good borrowers, but they were also excellent at repaying loans (Yunus, 2003). This, in combination with the argument that women often invested more of their financial resources and efforts to the advantage of the entire household than men, led many enthusiasts to see micro-credit as a development panacea. Essentially, the idea was that by extending the possibility of credit to poor women, women would begin to engage with markets and make financial gains previously inaccessible to them. In turn, these financial gains would benefit the entire household. As icing on the cake, it was thought that increases in income would allow women more bargaining power within the household and more exposure to public areas (markets, government officials, etc.), thus enhancing women’s socio-economic status and leading overall to increased empowerment of women.<sup>8</sup>

However, the issue of empowerment has become hotly debated, as scholars examine how to define and measure empowerment. Scholars have problematized the relationship between access to credit and empowerment by questioning whether women actually exercised some type of control of their loans (Goetz and Sen Gupta, 1996; Rahman, 1999; Holvoet, 2005; Pitt and Khandker, 1998), whether control actually led to challenging gender

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<sup>8</sup> This is directly informed by theories of new household economics (see work by Gary Becker, 1991) and New Institutional Economics (see Amartya Sen, 1990).

norms (Mahmud, 2003; Hunt and Kasynathan, 2001; Fernando, 1997) and whether challenging gender norms created positive change in gender relations or simply provoked violence between men and women (Schuler, Hashemi, Huda Badal 1998; Goetz and Sen Gupta, 1994; Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, Akhter, 1996). The explanations for why the results of the inquiries have been so varied have either concluded that questions of empowerment have been measured wrong, (such as with the wrong cultural ideals of what constitutes the definition of empowerment, see Kabeer, 2001) or that empowerment has various aspects (such as well-being, choice, and agency) that must be measured separately (Mahmud, 2003). Johnson (2005) even goes so far as to argue that empowerment simply *can't* be an effective indicator because it depends on gender relations, which are extremely difficult to quantify.<sup>9</sup> Thus, several authors have called for a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to begin to examine how women themselves describe the ways in which micro-credit affects their lives (Kabeer, 2001; Johnson, 2005). In any case, this literature, while offering a strong critique of micro-credit, is still invested in improving micro-credit. These researchers are not arguing that micro-credit itself is flawed, but rather that scholars and practitioners need to “get it right.”

## **DISCIPLINARY FRAMEWORKS**

A second set of literature, while drawing on the empowerment frameworks literature, rarely engages in conversation with it. This second school essentially challenges the concept of micro-credit itself. These scholars locate micro-credit in its capitalist, neoliberal context, and see micro-credit as a new tool of capitalist expansion and penetration (Fernando, 2006).

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<sup>9</sup> See Kabeer (2004) for a discussion on how neo-classical economics is unable to examine gender relations because of the inability to quantify power relations.

Their critiques most commonly draw upon Foucault's concept of governmentality. Foucault (2007) uses the concept of governmentality to examine how the idea of government emerged through various techniques of power in the formation of modern nation-states. More specifically, he states that governmentality is: "the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument." (p.108). Rose (1999) elaborates on Foucault's idea of governmentality and uses it to examine the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault's original term), or the way that governing occurs to "shape conduct so as to achieve certain ends" (p.3). This idea has become particularly useful in an era of neoliberalism, where the state is re-configuring its relations of governance. As Lemke (2003) argues, the concept of governmentality helps in examining the "constitution of new political forms and levels of the state such as the introduction of systems of negotiation, mechanism of self-organization, and empowerment strategies" (p.10). With respect to issues of development projects, Brigg (2001) notes that governmentality offers a more nuanced way of examining issues of power and domination because it expands beyond a simple assessment of the "economic" and in fact blurs the lines between the political, the economic and the social. Arguing that past critical development initiatives (such as dependency theory, world-systems theory, or regulation theory) are unable to "deal with *all* relations of domination through the multifaceted development enterprise" (p.235), Brigg instead posits that using the concept of governmentality allows for a better understanding of the material and discursive workings of the "development apparatus."

Thus, governmentality literature, with its emphasis on how the state, civil society, and the individual interact through technologies of power, seems well-suited to explore the mix of state, NGO, and individual participation that occurs within micro-credit programs. It changes the research focus from one of getting micro-credit “right” to one of examining how micro-credit apparatuses work as technique of power. Two examples of the use of governmentality to examine gender and micro-credit projects are articles by Katharine Rankin (2001) and Sian Lazar (2004). Rankin, in studying micro-credit in Nepal, argues that it “illustrates clear connections between state power and gender oppression” by attempting to create the subjectivity of “rational economic women” (p.20). In her view, the “rational economic woman” is one who does not rely on the state to provide her well-being, but who takes matters into her own hands via her interactions with markets. Essentially, the concept of the “rational economic woman” serves as a “change in the specification of the subjects of development *from beneficiaries* with social rights *to clients* with responsibilities to themselves and their families” (p.20, emphasis added).

Lazar (2004) expands on this idea by arguing that in Bolivia, this “client” subjectivity is being framed as the guiding discourse of how female *citizens* should act within a neoliberal state. Citizenship is then shaped through the educational components of micro-credit programs that “seek to create and ‘empower’ gendered citizens through the disciplining of their bodies within a particular image of womanhood” (p.316). This bodily discipline operates “in very intimate spheres” of women’s bodies through required attendance at health workshops that promote “responsible reproduction,” monogamy, and the use of Western (as opposed to traditional) medicine (p.314). Thus, Lazar argues that “microcredit is a form of



development intervention perfectly in line with neoliberal philosophies of the entrepreneurial, individual citizen and the privatization of citizenship” (p.302).

However, within this literature itself, there is a profound realization that while micro-credit projects *attempt* to mold neoliberal subjects, they often fail to do so. Both Rankin and Lazar see this as a limitation upon the theoretical tool of governmentality. In contrast to other approaches to governmentality mentioned above, both seem to be envisioning governmentality in an instrumentalist way—as a type of power-laden process that seeks to form subjects in a disciplining, structured manner that molds conduct in a very specific (capitalist) form. Rankin argues that in looking at the South Asian context, women are unable to be the “rational economic women” that micro-credit programs would like them to be. This is because “existing cultural ideologies and institutions” serve as obstacles for women’s development of their entrepreneurial capacity. Likewise, in Bolivia, Lazar argues that, “women’s patchy responses” (p.316) to the attempts of micro-credit organizations to create certain types of women indicates the failure of this project. For Lazar, micro-credit projects are only really able to be successful in some terms (i.e. loan repayment) because they rely upon local “embedded economies,” or economies structured by social relations (versus economies structured around the market, see Polanyi, 1957). Thus, the market rationalities are not necessarily taken up by Bolivian women. Together, both these pieces then create a realm whereby the creation of capitalist subjectivity is countered by a realm of culture. Governmentality, as the tool through which this is done, then fails to work.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The way governmentality is used here, as being “held back” by a realm of “culture” could be quite reasonably seen as a mis-application of Foucault’s that totalizes and essentializes power. While the concept of governmentality is not without critique (see De Certeau, 1988; Clarke, 2004; Li, 1999), its use in these pieces is somewhat problematic.

## PROBLEMS WITH MICRO-CREDIT LITERATURE:

Thus, both sets of literatures are at a type of impasse. The empowerment literature likens its inability to adequately account for “empowerment” to the lack of an appropriate method, while the literature based on governmentality posits that micro-credit projects don’t always have their intended effects due to a clash with a realm of “culture.” However, I argue that the impasse of both comes from an underlying logic that both frameworks share: the idea that women are somehow “outside” the economy. This is most obvious in thinking about the idea that both utilize: that through micro-credit, women are finally going to be brought “fully” into the economy (be it in an empowering or disciplinary way). This is perhaps most easily understood in the context of the “empowerment” literature. In this literature, women are universalized as victims of patriarchal oppression (see Mohanty, 1988). Providing them with an opportunity to engage in credit acquisition and entrepreneurial activities enables them to reverse the power differential. This is problematic because it presents the economy as something that is “out there,” an *a priori* entity that somehow magically can be brought to women to empower them. In treating the economy this way, this literatures fails to understand how the “economy” is actually a set of social relations that emerge in particular contexts. It also does not account for women’s multiple economic activities and they way in which gender relations help construct economic norms.<sup>11</sup> The literature that employs the

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<sup>11</sup> The work of J.K. Gibson/Graham (2006) lays out more specifically the problems with a failure to account for the social construction of both the economy and the category of “women.” In attempting to demonstrate the ways in which capitalism has been construed as an all-powerful, a priori universal force instead of as a type of practice and social relation, Gibson-Graham draws on feminist’s critique of the concept of “universal man.” Engaging with feminist theory that has deconstructed the notion of the category of “universal man,” (and thus its negative binary, woman) Gibson-Graham takes this argument and applies it to capitalism (whose negative binary is precapitalism or noncapitalism):

Noncapitalism is to capitalism as woman to man: an insufficiency until and unless it is released from the binary metaphysics of identity (where A is a unified self-identical being that excludes what it is not). If capitalism/man can be understood as multiple and specific; if it is not a unity but a heterogeneity, not a sameness but a difference; if it is always becoming what it is not, if it incorporates difference within its

governmentality framework is problematic because it makes a similar move, albeit in a more complex way. While both Lazar (2004) and Rankin (2001) make an important point that women do not necessarily take up neoliberal subjectivities as promoted by the state or civil society, they fail to interrogate *why* this is so, instead falling back on ideas of a “traditional” culture that does not allow for penetration by capitalist ideologies. In doing this, they move toward separating culture and economy into two separate spheres. This not only promotes the idea that women are somehow “outside” the economy, but it also makes them unable to account for the ways in which women might both simultaneously accept and reject various aspects of micro-credit “rationality.”

Timothy Mitchell (1998) demonstrates the danger of separating a realm of “culture” from a realm of “economy”<sup>12</sup>. Mitchell critiques the separation of the concept of “the economy” as a “self-contained sphere” from a realm of culture that he argues has occurred within a particular moment of twentieth century capitalism. He contends that the separation of these two realms has worked discursively to validate various national and international political projects, especially those related to development. He writes that, “the discursive

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decentered being; then noncapitalism/woman is released from its singular and subordinate status. There is no singularity of Form to constitute noncapitalism/woman as a simple negation or as the recessive ground against which the positive figure of capitalism/man is defined. To conceptualize capitalism/man as multiple and different is thus a condition of theorizing noncapitalism/woman as a set of specific, definite forms of being. (p.44)

Essentially, thinking of capitalism as a monolithic force that somehow destroys, penetrates, or changes all in its path is similar to thinking of “man” (and thus “woman”) as a coherent entity. Gibson-Graham calls for a re-thinking of capitalism away from a homogenous totality and toward a “heterogeneous and open-ended economic space.” This heterogeneous space then demonstrates how non-capitalist practices and alternatives already exist. Key to this re-conceptualization of the economy is its move away from abstraction and toward the foregrounding of social relations as constitutive of the economy.

<sup>12</sup> Polanyi (1957) made this argument most eloquently in describing the emergence of liberal capitalism at the end of the eighteenth century: “A self-regulating market demands nothing less than the institutional separation of society into an economic and political sphere” (p.71). Likewise, Foucault (2007) discusses how political economy, with its separation of the realm of the economic, was the “form of knowledge” of the modern state system. I use Mitchell here because he is specifically talking about how this separation works with issues of development in the twentieth century.

order of capital” attempts “to establish the economy as a distinct, self-contained sphere—a sphere in whose construction the cultural, the traditional, the personal, supposedly play no part, except by their exclusion” (p.98). Thus, part of this conceptualization of the “economic” has been the construction of its binary, the “non-economic.” People living in the third world (notably peasants) have therefore been seen as representing a non-economic realm, a realm that continually needs to be incorporated into the economy (or into capitalist development projects), or that remains “outside” the economy and serves as a source of authentic agency against capitalist modernity. Mitchell argues that neither conception, seeing peasants as either a source of pure agency outside of capitalism or as a “temporary contradiction” of capitalist expansion, is helpful in accounting for the complex formations of rural people’s everyday lives: “The analytical neatness fails to correspond to the uncertainty and ambiguity of relationships in the village, where lives are constructed on the edge of the economy in ways that often seem to escape its terms” (p.98). Not only does this analysis fail to account for the complexity of “hybrid” lives, but it also creates a binary conceptualization of agency, as those who are outside the economy will either have power (if they remain external to the economy) or will succumb to it (if they engage with it).

Thus, both the “empowerment” and “disciplinary” frameworks rely upon a logic that implies that women are not yet *in* the economy—that they inhabit some “non-economic” realm. If we follow Mitchell’s critique of the binary between economic and non-economic, this would then imply that women can only inhabit one of two spaces: a realm of pure agency external to capitalism, or a space of contradiction that will eventually transition to a site external or internal to capitalism. Thus, not only does this formulation inspire a binary relationship of capitalism to pre-capitalism, but it also by default collects women into a

coherent category. By this I mean that women are then constituted as a coherent group—as united by their position outside of the economy—and the social construction of gender and sexuality are no longer considered.

The problem with unifying a group of women in such a way is perhaps best explained by Chandra Mohanty. In her piece “Under Western Eyes” (1988), Mohanty argues that through the creation of the idea of “the third world woman” Western feminists “discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world” (p.53). One of the ways in which this is done is through the analytic presupposition of western feminism that women are “an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial locations or contradictions” which in turn “implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally” (p.55). It is through this logic that Western feminism has thus been able to paint the idea of “third world women” who are united based on their gender as victims of patriarchy and oppression. (This presentation of the third world woman as poor, oppressed, and traditional serves as the foundation against which western feminists are able to define themselves as modern, educated, and “free.”) The idea of women in the third world as being a pre-constituted, unified group assigns them a type of “object status” which positions them as somehow “outside” social relations and institutions. It paints them as inactive subjects who don’t *do* things but have things *done to them*:

Because women are thus constituted as a coherent group, sexual difference becomes coterminous with female subordination, and power is automatically defined in binary terms: people who have it (read: men), and people who do not (read: women). Men exploit, women are exploited. Such simplistic formulations are historically reductive;

they are also ineffectual in designing strategies to combat oppressions. All they do is reinforce binary divisions between men and women. (p.64)

Thus, the universalization of the category of women which does not account for its particular formation through different social processes leads to a perpetual victimization of women in the third world.

Thus, merging Mohanty and Mitchell, we can see how the failure to deconstruct the binary conception of the “economic” and the “non-economic” in micro-credit analysis promotes the idea of women as a unified and coherent category—the third world women located “outside” the economy. This problematically allows for a view of women as external to capitalism, in which they can either be construed as pure victims of capitalist penetration or pure agents of an exterior logic. This conceptualization is thus a type of discursive colonization that not only does violence to rural women, but also fails to adequately understand changing rural contexts and livelihoods.

## **GENDERED MORAL ECONOMIES**

Adequately attempting to examine micro-credit projects and the way they come to be experienced within rural communities requires both an attention to the construction of the “economy” and to the construction of gender roles. As Gillian Hart (1997) notes, “gender needs to be understood as *constitutive* of economic processes,” which can be done by examining “the ways that culturally-constructed and gendered meanings both inform and are shaped by everyday practices both within and beyond the household” (p.19). To conduct such an examination, I rely upon the idea of gendered moral economies.

The term moral economy was first used by the historian E.P. Thompson (1971). Studying bread riots in the eighteenth century, Thompson argued that riots were not simply unthinking and reactionary responses to an increase in grain prices; rather, they were “rational,” often planned events informed by the communal ethics of justice and legitimacy in relation to the provision of a staple food. In using this argument, Thompson challenged the concept of “economic man,” the rational, self-interested individual that serves as the basis of neo-classical economics. He instead brought forth the idea that social norms and obligations related to economic distribution are just as important as an individual’s economic calculations. He writes:

It is of course true that riots were triggered off by soaring prices, by malpractices among dealers, or by hunger. But these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc. This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action. (p.79)

Thus, Thompson challenged the accuracy of explanatory models of protest based on the idea of a universally “rational” individual, instead demonstrating that context and cultural norms are also important factors to be considered.

“Moral economy” took on a particularly agrarian meaning when James Scott (1976) used it to study peasant resistance in Southeast Asia. Scott argued that the “norm of reciprocity” (reciprocal obligations of sharing and giving) and the “right to subsistence” (that

all humans have a moral right to physical survival) were the key moral principles that guided peasant life (p.167). In Scott's research, peasant moral economies did not demand a radical egalitarianism, but rather an obligation from those with more resources to share and manage those resources according to social norms. When the norms of reciprocity and subsistence in these moral economies were drastically challenged, as they violently were during the colonial period, resistance was more common. This conception of the peasantry—as having their own set of morals and values—allows for a view of the peasant as that of an agent of history:

...the peasant as a political actor is more than a statistical abstract of available calories and outgoing rent and tax charges—more than a mere consumer, as it were, whose politics may be deduced from his daily food intake. It confers on him, as we confer on elite political actors as a matter of course, a history, a political consciousness, and a perception of the moral structure of his society. It implies that his sense of what is just allows him to judge others as morally responsible for his predicament and allows him to act, not just to restore his subsistence but to claim his rights. (p.189)

While Scott's claims made an important contribution to the field of agrarian studies, the concept of moral economy has since been highly criticized. Mitchell (1990) sees Scott's conception of the peasant as an "authentic" realm of pre-capitalist consciousness as a dangerous separation of a world of meaning from a world of material reality. Likewise, Mallon (1995) explicitly contradicts Scott, arguing that he "...postulates the existence of a hidden culture of resistance separate from official or hegemonic culture and thus somehow



still autonomous and internally coherent...” (p.367). Mallon argues that this conception masks important internal power relations in peasant communities, as “...scholars tended to idealize and homogenize the peasant community, constructing it as a seamless universe in which all agreed on how to define the moral economy and on what parts of the old world they sought to regain” (p.64).<sup>13</sup> Mallon uses the concept of hegemony, both as a process and an outcome, to guide her assessment of how peasant communities themselves were sites of contention, exploitation, and violence.

Drawing on the rich history of critique and development surrounding the term, the most recent use of moral economies within agrarian studies by Wendy Wolford (2005) presents a much more nuanced re-working of the concept. Wolford, in a study of neoliberal land reform initiatives in Brazil, demonstrates how both the agrarian elite and the rural landless poor made sense of these reforms through the interpretive framework of differing agrarian moral economies. Wolford defines moral economy as “the moral arguments (ideal models or ideology) used by a particular group of people to define the optimal organization of society, including most importantly an outline of how society’s productive resources...ought to be divided” (p.243). She argues that the concept is useful for four main reasons. First, it places on equal ground differing “value laden, historically situated” claims. This is important in deconstructing binary relations of power by recognizing that both elites and the rural poor have moral traditions that they seek to defend. Second, “moral economy” denaturalizes “seemingly objective claims to resources” by investigating how these claims are constructed via social relations (p. 244). Third, it allows for an understanding of how neoliberal ideas are taken up in particular ways based on how they are legitimized within

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<sup>13</sup> Likewise, this critique has even expanded to post-development theorists (most notably Escobar 1994), who, in attempting to demonstrate how “development” was a discourse have privileged “local” knowledges, implying a separate realm of traditional knowledge outside of capitalism (see Gibson-Graham 1996/2006).

specific moral economies. Fourth, Wolford argues that “moral economy” demonstrates better than other similar terms how ideology and concrete material contexts are not separate entities, but are formed and articulated through relationships and actions. She writes, “moral economies certainly express a certain set of values, but the concept goes beyond the values themselves to include the relationship, processes, and events through which the values are produced” (p.245).

Wolford’s re-working of moral economies strongly emphasizes how social relations and resource uses shape each other in spatially and historically situated contexts. However, in using a moral economies framework, scholars of agrarian studies have often failed to examine one key social relation: gender<sup>14</sup>. Interestingly, however, feminist scholars outside of agrarian studies are beginning to focus on moral aspects of economic relations, using the term “moral economy” to discuss gender and economic norms in contemporary urban settings<sup>15</sup>. One example of this is McDowell et al (2005) who use the term to advocate for an awareness of how economic policies interact with women’s socially acceptable notions of care and morality. In assessing how women’s increased employment levels and simultaneous lack of child care provisioning affects and is affected by norms of women’s responsibility to their children, McDowell et al insist that it is important to, “combine an understanding of ideological orientations towards caring with a knowledge of differential command over resources and assets” (p.231). They suggest thinking in terms of “moral geographies” as a way to understand how women’s ethics of care are informed by their experiences in various social and cultural networks.

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<sup>14</sup> Work by Gillian Hart (1991) is a notable exception.

<sup>15</sup> McDowell takes the term from Irwin and Bottero (2000). Irwin and Bottero cite Thompson as the original source for the term, but argue that they want to apply it to modern market societies.

While McDowell et al make an important point that gendered notions of caring are essentially tied to economic processes, they only hint at how a moral economy perspective can be a productive framework from which to analyze both gender norms and economic norms. The work of Irwin and Bottero (2000) is much more explicit in how “moral economy” could be helpful in such a project. Irwin and Bottero examine the interface between economic morals and gender with respect to production and reproduction. Challenging the idea that the twentieth century shift toward women entering into paid-labor indicates the emergence of a more individualized, market-oriented society, they use the concept of moral economy to argue that social relations, rather than market forces, structure society. They argue that “moral economy” is a helpful way to understand gender relations because it serves as a “framework in which gender, as a socially significant category, can itself be understood as bound up with claiming processes” (p.272). Thus, through their use of the moral economy framework, Irwin and Bottero are able to analyze how gendered norms both form and are formed by other social norms (i.e. related to claims on resources) that may not usually be considered part of gendered analysis.

In summary then, drawing on Wolford’s elaboration of the agrarian studies tradition of “moral economy” and combining this with Irwin and Bottero’s understanding of the role of gender in economic relations leads to what I call *gendered moral economies*. Gendered moral economies can be seen as the merging of the feminist argument that gender is constructed through social relations with the moral economy understanding of how social relations form around resources. This process is mutually constitutive in that gendered claims and economic claims produce each other. Thus, a gendered moral economies theoretical framework allows us to explore how gender relations both structure and maintain moral

claims on scarce resources. Since micro-credit programs function through gendered norms of economic responsibility, gendered moral economy is an excellent framework through which to understand how gender norms and economic norms form each other in particular contexts and in struggles over specific resources.

## **CASE STUDY: MEXICO'S RURAL REFORMS AND MICRO-CREDIT**

Within the past twenty years, changing economic conditions and market-based neoliberal reforms have made rural livelihoods more tenuous for many small-scale Mexican farmers. The 1982 peso crises meant that Mexico defaulted on its loans and accepted a structural adjustment bailout package from the IMF (Harvey, 2005). As required by the package, Mexico had to curb state-spending and cut back on welfare provision and agricultural support. For rural areas, this meant that the system of large agricultural subsidies previously promoted by the government as a way to stabilize the Mexican balance of payments and counter the imports of capital goods under import substitution industrialization became unsustainable (de Janvry, 1981; de Janvry, Gordillo Sadoulet 1997; Appendini 1998). Following the peso crisis, Mexico began a program of trade liberalization. It joined the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) and in 1994 entered into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canada and the United States. These trade agreements were also difficult for many Mexican farmers as tariffs on agricultural goods were dropped and remaining agricultural subsidies were slated for termination. Simultaneously, the government altered Article 27 of the Mexican constitution to end state-led land distribution. This meant that *ejido* communal lands could now be titled and sold<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> See *Reforming Mexico's Agrarian Reform* (1996) edited by Laura Randall for an assessment of Article 27 *ejido* land reforms

Realizing that these neoliberal reforms could severely de-stabilize the historically rebellious countryside, the Mexican government began to put in place several “neo-populist” rural programs. These programs, most notably PROCAMPO and OPORTUNIDADES, are cash-transfer programs that, while using less money, still maintain the state’s presence in rural areas (Appendini, 1998; Bartra, 1996).<sup>17</sup> Thus, rural reforms in Mexican agriculture resemble Peck and Tickell’s (2002) idea of “roll-out” neoliberalism, in which the state is not necessarily retreating from policy, but reconfiguring its role in a different way.

One key aspect of these reforms that is particularly helpful in understanding the context of non-governmental micro-credit programs in rural Mexico is the re-configuration of rural finance. As Myhre (1998) argues, the changes in rural finance garnered more protest from campesinos than the privatization of *ejidos*, as for many Mexicans, rural credit has represented a type of social contract with the state, one formed out of the agrarian struggles that are the legacy of the Mexican revolution. Myhre writes: “Overall, rural finance has become firmly entrenched in the minds of campesinos as an expression of the state’s long-standing obligation to repay rural Mexicans for their sacrifices during the Revolution and their later service as providers of cheap food and labor for the growing urban sector” (p.41).

Before the peso crisis, most agricultural producers in Mexico could access credit from the state agricultural bank, BANRURAL. However, in the late 1980s, as a result of Mexico’s structural adjustment programs, the government streamlined client groups into four main categories, cutting more than 550,000 borrowers from BANRURAL between 1988 and 1994, most of whom were subsistence producers. The state hoped to service many of these

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<sup>17</sup> Appendini argues that these programs designed to appease campesinos fit in with the state’s modernization project (designed to modernize the “traditional” small-scale agricultural sector) in agriculture, which still exists, but that is being geared more and more to fit in with the state’s simultaneous promotion of the globalization project in agriculture (geared toward commercial farmers and promoting agricultural competition).

borrowers with a new program, Crédito a la Palabra, the government's new microfinance initiative (Myhre, 1998). After its creation in 1990, Crédito a la Palabra quickly became touted as the program which increased access to credit for more agricultural producers than ever before (Myhre, 1998; Sadoulet, de Janvry, and Davis, 1997).<sup>18</sup> However, while the program did reach more campesinos, the amount of credit given was between one fourth and one fifth of that previously given by BANRURAL. Alongside Crédito a la Palabra came the creation of PROCAMPO. Designed as a way to help Mexican farmers "ease" into the agricultural free trade aspects of NAFTA, PROCAMPO is a simple cash transfer program in which farmers who produce basic grains receive cash per hectare of land in production (Appendini, 1998).<sup>19</sup> PROCAMPO has thus reached both producers who were too small to previously benefit from government price-support programs *and* large-scale farmers (Sadoulet, de Janvry, and Davis, 1997). Thus, both Crédito a la Palabra and PROCAMPO demonstrate how the Mexican state, while cutting back on overall agricultural finance expenses, has managed to create new types of programs that paradoxically provide *more* people with *less* support. This leaves many campesinos to supplement their agricultural livelihoods through new types of informal rural finance including various sharecropping systems, a reliance on local moneylenders, and a dependence upon migrant remittances (Myhre, 1998).

While most of these rural reforms and new rural programs have been "gender blind," one other reform that has played an important role in rural areas of Mexico is geared

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<sup>18</sup> The program consists of loans given to community associations for disbursement among local farmers. They have no interest and can finance up to three hectares of crops, and continued participation depends on repayment records. Thus, the program is described by Myhre as focusing on "subsidizing subsistence" rather than promoting agricultural growth (p.58).

<sup>19</sup> It is slated to end in 2010 as the NAFTA "transition" period ends and Mexico is to have no state agricultural subsidies.

specifically toward women. This program, OPORTUNIDADES (previously known as PROGRESA), is a cash-transfer program similar to PROCAMPO. Established in 1997, the program gives cash to the poorest mothers from communities identified as economically marginal. Women receive benefits based on the number of children they have, the number of children in school (totals are higher for female children than male children) and their attendance records, and women's attendance at health and nutritional meetings. Within two years, the program covered about 2.6 million families—including 40% of all rural families (Skoufias, 2001).

While OPORTUNIDADES has provided resources for many rural women in Mexico, it is particularly insightful to examine it as part of a historical trajectory in Latin American social policy whereby women are targeted as mothers responsible for their family's welfare (Molyneux, 2006). Through it, we see how gender has become a key site through which neo-populist programs work in a neoliberal context. While undoubtedly falling under the rubric of cash-transfer programs designed to make rural economic reforms more bearable, Luccisano (2004), argues that OPORTUNIDADES is quintessentially neoliberal because through its behavior requirements and its emphasis on women's roles in ensuring familial health and education, it shifts the burden of social welfare from state provision to one of women's "co-responsibility" (with the state) for their family's welfare.

Thus, within changing rural contexts, women have emerged as key players in Mexico's move toward neoliberal political and economic projects in the Mexican countryside. Likewise, micro-credit has emerged as an important aspect of Mexican development projects. As of 2005, Mexico had the most micro-credit clients of any Latin American country, with an estimated client base of 347,874 (Acción study). Of these clients,

309, 637 belong to the organization Compartamos (We share). Within the last two years, Compartamos' client base has doubled to a total of 616,528, 98% of whom are women and 95% of whom live in rural areas (defined as being outside of Mexico City).<sup>20</sup>

### ***Gendered Moral Economies and Micro-credit in Cuquío***

I now turn to a case study in which I use a gendered moral economy framework to help analyze research I did with women in rural Jalisco, Mexico. In the spring of 2003, I conducted semi-formal interviews with 28 women in the municipality of Cuquío, all of whom receive micro-credit loans from a non-governmental organization, CAMPOJAL. Cuquío is an agricultural municipality a few hours northeast of Guadalajara in the region of “Los Altos” and has a population of 16, 236.<sup>21</sup> Los Altos is known as “las tierras flacas” or the lean lands, as its altitude (from 5,800 to 7,400 feet) and its limited access to water differentiates it from the more fertile river valleys that surround the city of Guadalajara (Tuck, 1982). A predominately flat, red-clay plateau, the region is known for its cattle, tomato and corn production. Cuquío has a semi-arid climate, with dry winters and springs and a rainy season from June through August, with an annual average precipitation of 33 inches.<sup>22</sup>

The region of Los Altos has a unique history within Mexico. As one of the main sites of the Cristero Rebellion (1926-1929), a rural rebellion that went against the anti-clerical reforms of the Mexican Revolution, Los Altos is known for its strong Catholic faith.

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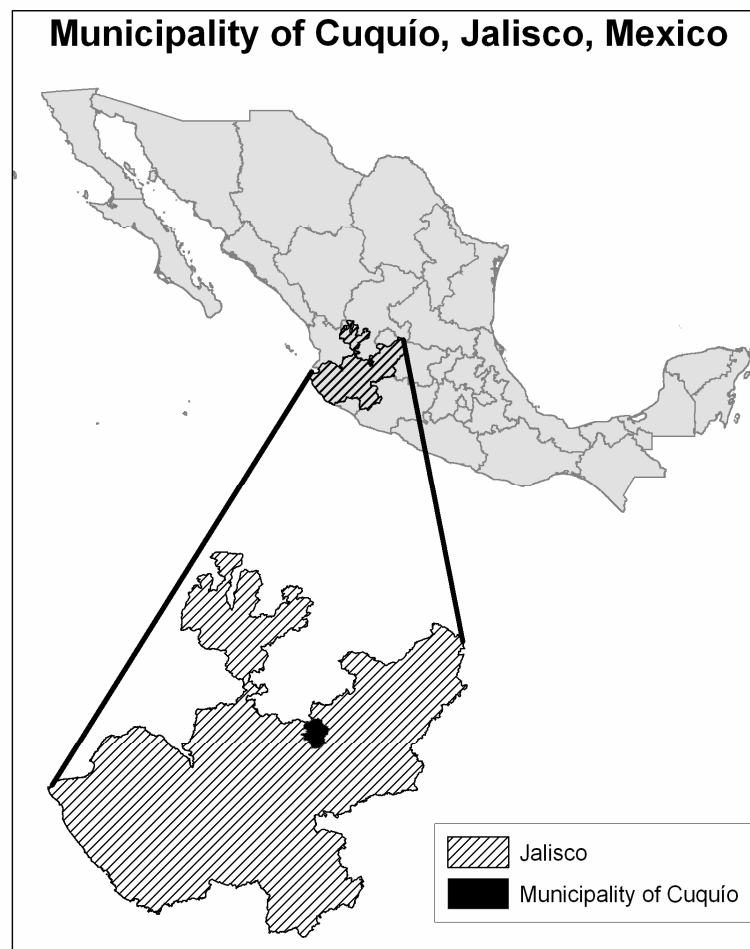
<sup>20</sup> [http://www.accion.org/about\\_where\\_we\\_work\\_program.asp\\_Q\\_T\\_E\\_11](http://www.accion.org/about_where_we_work_program.asp_Q_T_E_11)

<sup>21</sup> INEGI. II Conteo de Población y Vivienda 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Climate data is from the Enciclopedia de los Municipios de México, Estado de Jalisco, Cuquío <http://www.e-local.gob.mx/work/templates/enciclo/jalisco/mpios/14029a.htm>



As Tuck (1982) observes, “nowhere else in Mexico is Catholicism so deeply and strongly rooted” (p.10). The region’s historical support of the Catholic church meant that it served as a station for European troops during Napoleon’s invasion of Mexico in the 1860s, which led to a European influence in the area where indigenous groups were not centrally organized. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, indigenous identities waned as the strong ranchero culture, the charreadas (rodeos) and vaqueros (cowboys) related to cattle production, expanded. Additionally, because of its strong Catholic ties and its historical resistance to the federal government, the region did not embrace agrarian reforms and land is owned privately, rather than communally.



This has resulted in land concentration and the establishment of the mediero system, a type of share-cropping arrangement in which the land owner provides the land and half of the implements to farm it, and the sharecropper provides his labor and the other half of the farming implements (Exter, 1976).

Just as in the rest of rural Mexico, Cuquío has experienced increasingly difficult conditions in the countryside over the last twenty five years. Rural finance reforms, the loss of rentability in agriculture due to the debt crisis of 1982, the fiscal crisis in 1994, and the implementation of NAFTA's free trade provisions with respect to agricultural goods have meant that many small-scale farmers in Jalisco have had to reduce their areas of cultivation or rent their lands. As part of this economic squeeze, many people have shifted toward taking informal loans from local moneylenders at incredibly high interest rates and have looked for work through local or international migration (CAMPOJAL interview).

Responding to the gap in credit provision, CAMPOJAL, began to provide small loans to women's cooperatives in the early 1990s. Founded in 1989, CAMPOJAL was initially part of larger non-governmental programs to promote campesino education in economic, political and social arenas. In the early 1990s, however, women began to assert that credit and support were difficult for them to access and in 1994, CAMPOJAL switched to working exclusively with women, arguing that women felt the effects of rural economic reform more than men (personal interview and CAMPOJAL history document). Given to groups of women who are able to gather 10% of the requested loan amount up front, CAMPOJAL's loans are designated for "productive activities" such as livestock raising, crop cultivation, agricultural implements or tools, equipment or primary material for micro-enterprises, and

household infrastructure improvement. The maximum amount given to any client in a given loan cycle is \$5000 pesos (about USD \$500), and interest is 2% per month (paid monthly). In addition to providing financial support for cooperatives, CAMPOJAL provides technical and accounting advice and has a leadership program for women's empowerment (cover such topics as health, self-esteem, group dynamics, child welfare, etc). Thus, CAMPOJAL's micro-credit program was formed based upon strong ideas of gender equality as well as a commitment to sustainable agriculture.

The women I surveyed were from seven different communities in the municipality of Cuquío. Each community had its own women's micro-credit cooperative, the oldest of which had been established seven years previously (in 1996) and the youngest in 2001. The average age of the women was 44, and more than 50% of them did not study beyond the fourth grade. 75% of them had held some type of leadership position in their cooperative as treasurer, president, health coordinator, or secretary. Financially, most women were dependent upon their husbands (the majority of whom were engaged in agricultural activities). Three women with whom I spoke had employment outside the household (one cared for a child, another for an elderly person, and another ran her own store) and the rest worked within the household. Other sources of income for many women included OPORTUNIDADES, and a few received support from other small loan projects (Cuquío el Futuro and Crédito a la Palabra). For many of the women, CAMPOJAL's micro-credit was one of the most accessible financial resources available to them.

In conducting research with CAMPOJAL's clients, my goal was to help CAMPOJAL determine how micro-credit programs were benefiting women. CAMPOJAL staff were interested to know if women (or their husbands) were exercising control over CAMPOJAL

loans, how women were repaying their loans, and what other types of funding women were able to access. Additionally, they wanted to know overall how being part of a cooperative and receiving financial support affected women's lives. In attempting to examine CAMPOJAL's questions, I drew upon a framework offered by USAID's project on assessing the impact of microenterprise services (AIMS) (written by Chen, 1997). AIMS is a combination of desk studies, field research and three impact assessments that attempt to clarify issues of how to measure the impact of microenterprise (savings, micro-credit, and small business development). To help organize issues of measurement, AIMS conceptualized the household as "an economic portfolio with multiple resources and activities which are carried out both jointly and individually" (p.iii) and then sought to measure impact at various levels within the household: the individual, the enterprise, and the household unit itself. AIMS asserted that with respect to microenterprise, individuals experienced change in four ways: material (enhanced income or satisfaction of basic needs), cognitive (enhancement of knowledge or skills), perceptual (increase in self-esteem, self-confidence, and vision of the future), and relational (increase in decision-making, more bargaining power, increased mobility). AIMS then put forth a survey including all these elements that they then encouraged practitioners to use in assessing microenterprise.

My adaptation of the survey was informed by CAMPOJAL's staff to make the questions site specific for Cuquío and included the categories of basic data, control and property, self-esteem, health, and the future. Additionally, I also changed the survey to ask more open-ended interview questions. I found that overall most women were able to make some type of financial gain from micro-credit projects, although over half admitted that they often had problems paying back their loans. Most women used their loans to buy cows and

pigs, and most were able to pay back their loans (and make a small profit) by selling the animal later. Those who could not sell their livestock to pay back loans often had to rely on the assistance of their husbands or migrant family member's remittance money. In talking about how receiving micro-credit and being a part of a micro-credit cooperative affected their lives, many women told me they had increased their participation in community leadership activities and had traveled outside their houses on a more regular basis. Almost all enjoyed participating in their cooperatives and receiving credit.

After assessing my results according the AIMS-guided survey, I found that in general, economic benefits for women seemed to be small, but that participation in their micro-credit cooperatives increased women's cognitive, perceptual, and relational abilities. However, this conclusion, while fitting nicely into the empowerment framework (and likewise into the disciplinary framework), fails to account for the processes of how micro-credit is being understood and made meaningful in Cuquío. While the AIMS framework did insist on the importance of accounting for gender "ideology," it presented gender norms as a "mediating variable" that could not be measured, but should be accounted for in the "contextual analysis" of the microenterprise arrangement: "this guide suggests that social norms regarding the gender division of labor, gender norms of behavior, and gender allocation of resources are key mediating variables: particularly for programs which target low-income women in traditional societies" (p.iv). In this treatment of the "gender context" we can once again explicitly see the logic of the separation of "culture" from the "economy." The idea that the impact of microenterprise is something that is first measured as a relationship of the individual with new economic processes and then analyzed according to the context of the gender ideology, demonstrates how AIMS separates out issues of the individual from the

economy and from culture in an attempt to assess and analyze the outcomes of micro-credit. Thus, even in employing the AIMS survey, I found that my results, while they could be read according to AIMS guidelines, were much more complex and messy than the AIMS outcome assessment would allow for. In my interviews, women presented a much more nuanced, complex, and contradictory account of micro-credit that centered predominantly upon appropriate gender norms and women's responsibility for social reproduction.

One constant theme of the interviews was the idea of economic struggle, or the sense that having enough food, clothing and access to health care were things not taken for granted. One woman told me that she worried about the future because *"each day the prices of things are rising and rising. You need more in order to buy things, and here there is no way to get money."*<sup>23</sup> When asked what could help their economic situation, more than any type of micro-credit, almost all women wanted a source of employment in their community. Many blamed the lack of economic development on the government. As one woman, Sara, told me, *"the government demands that kids study, but doesn't provide work. Without education, it's the same, because here there are kids that have studied, but they have the same opportunities as those that haven't. The government should have jobs available, so that when kids finish their schooling, they have some type of employment. But there is nothing"* Realizing that employment sources were not going to be arriving anytime soon, however, women saw micro-credit as a way to help lessen the daily precariousness of life.

CAMPOJAL's provision of micro-credit was one of the few ways in which women could find extra monetary resources, other than borrowing from neighbors. If we follow Wolford's (2005) argument that outlines of moral economies are more visible when productive resources are scarce, examining how gendered norms are constructed, manipulated, or

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<sup>23</sup> All translations from Spanish to English are mine

maintained regarding micro-credit programs in Cuquío demonstrates the formative role of gender in the negotiation of moral economies.

One of the elements that came out most clearly in the interviews was a sense of the appropriate roles for both good wives/mothers and good husbands/fathers. These roles centered predominately on the provision of economic goods for the family. In Cuquío, (as in much of Mexico and Latin America) women are seen as those who are most directly involved with the social reproduction of the family. Essentially, a good wife/mother must make sure the family is fed, clothed, and kept healthy, and that children are sent to school. As one woman told me, “A women has to get the food together. I am the one that gets things for the house and makes sure that the kids go to school.” Meanwhile, men must be able to make this happen. The good husband/father is one who gives all or most of his money to his family so that the wife can purchase the items necessary for the maintenance of the entire family.

In particular, these sentiments were expressed in my conversation with Clara. Clara told me very clearly what her and her husband’s roles were with respect to household money. I asked her who keeps the money in her household and she responded:

*You could say that both of us do, because whenever there is money, he puts it away and tells me that it is there if I need something. So, you could say that we both keep the money. Because I can’t say that he uses it for his vices and doesn’t give me any. He works hard, and what money he gets is for the household. Because sometimes when men have a lot of vices, they take the money and they go and use it all. Also, I’m not going to go and mis-spend the money. I buy what we need for the house and*

*what we need to eat. That is not a mis-spending of money either. Overall, we invest our money well.*

Thus, Clara's husband, as a "good" husband who doesn't drink, provides her with money. Clara's role, as a good wife, is to make sure this money is "invested well," or essentially, that her family's well-being is taken care of. Another interview with a man named Josefa similarly echoed that the woman's role is to care for the overall well-being of the family. My interview with her was particularly emotional as she recounted to me her experiences of trying to borrow money to care for her sick children. She said:

*How do I manage to keep going? It's not easy. Because often I don't have anything in case of an emergency or an illness. As far as food goes, I can eat just beans and tortillas, but if you don't have money, an illness is what can torment you the most, right? This is the most difficult thing that has occurred to me. To eat, well, as you like it. But when one is sick, how difficult! Like when my son was sick for three years. He just got better in July. Three years I spent going from one place to another, gathering money here and there. It was so bad. I lacked so much and it was so difficult for me. His medical tests and analysis were so expensive, I went to one person and another, seeing if they would lend me money. If they didn't have it, I'd go to someone else, and they would lend me a little. I spent three years doing that...because of this the struggle is so hard. To get some money in one place, to get it in another, and to be full of debt. My husband is a good worker. He doesn't have a single vice. The little that he makes, he says, "take it, woman, you know how to make use of it." He gives me everything. He doesn't even keep a cent. Day after day he is out working.*



This excerpt from Josefa's interview, while demonstrating several important aspects of life in Cuquío (namely lack of affordable health care, the use of local loans, etc), shows quite clearly the appropriate gender norms with respect to economic resources. Josefa's husband works daily and, as a good husband, gives his money over to her instead of spending it on "vices". However, when that money is not sufficient, as in the case of illness, Josefa must make things work somehow, as she still has the responsibility to fulfill her "appropriate" gender role, that of providing for the health and well-being of her family.

Thus, women were forced to balance the gendered norm that women are in charge of providing for the well-being of the family with the fact that often the resources aren't available. For some women, this meant that they took on procuring micro-credit as part of their definition of being a good wife/mother. The comments of Lilia relayed the idea that for many women, securing loans from CAMPOJAL has become part of their work: In discussing what she does well, Lilia told me, *"I think that I do everything well. Attending to my family as I can and helping my husband with work. And, helping with the finances. Getting the loans so that things are more economic. Because these are things that he can't do because they don't give men the right to do so. The women have to get it, right? Like in the cooperative groups, he doesn't have a vote or a voice there."* Thus, because her husband can't access the loan, Lilia has to. Her role as needing to ensure the well-being of the family is the means through which Lilia, and many other women, validated her participation in their micro-credit cooperative, a place where men are not "allowed."

In accessing micro-credit, especially in a space where men are "not allowed," women like Lilia are taking on a new role that has traditionally been labeled "male." Despite the understanding that Lilia and almost all the other women I interviewed have that their work

with the micro-credit cooperative is validated according to their gendered responsibilities, their participation is seen by many as being inappropriate. As one woman, Rebecca, told me, *“There is a man that says ‘ay, yay, yaya, I don’t want to live here because there are these women here,’ he means us in the cooperative. He says that anymore, the men aren’t in charge.”* Thus, many women, by participating in the act of procuring resources for their families, told me that they were criticized for doing precisely the opposite: abandoning their families. Several commented that they were seen as being women “out of control,” who run around not attending to their households. Others commented that many men didn’t permit their wives to join the cooperative because they would have to leave their households for cooperative meetings, thus both leaving the household unattended in their absence and engaging in movement to areas not normally regarded as women’s spaces. A comment by Celia demonstrates this well. When asked if she thought that women had the same rights as men do, she responded: *“We have the same rights, it’s just that things are more difficult for us because since we’re responsible for the household, we aren’t granted freedom from our husbands. Because if we go somewhere, for example to a meeting in Cuquío, then we’re not attending to the family. So, in that way, we’re not that free. One doesn’t feel the same liberty that men have. The rights are the same, but men still don’t take them into account.”*

An example of how some women sought to balance the expectations that a “good” mother stays at home with the idea that a “good” mother needs to procure the scarce resource of micro-credit is demonstrated through my conversation with Maria:

Holly: *Do you think that people treat you differently because you are in the cooperative?*

*Maria: Well sometimes yes, because people will say, 'Ay, those women (of the cooperative) just go around.' Sometimes these are criticisms from other families, and they'll say, "Look at these women, how their husbands don't control them." This is why they say that you have to face up to what happens.*

*Holly: And how does your husband react to that?*

*Maria: He says that I'm not doing anything bad. That I'm fighting for our well-being. Because if it weren't for this, we wouldn't have the help that we have gotten, right? We have to struggle. Support isn't going to come to us if we're just sitting here. You always have to struggle in order to have something.*

Maria's husband's validation that she is "not doing anything bad" demonstrates how engagement with micro-credit programs both forms and is formed by definitions of good and proper gendered behavior. However, the fact that others see Maria's participation as improper also demonstrates how these norms are constantly contested and negotiated. On the one hand, women, as good wives and mothers, are supposed to seek the resources possible to maintain their family's well being. On the other hand, women, as good wives and mothers, are also supposed to be obedient and to have limited movement outside their homes. Thus, a woman's participation in a micro-credit cooperative could both be critiqued as inappropriate behavior because she wasn't at home caring for her family, just as it could likewise be upheld as appropriate behavior because she *was* caring for her family by securing scarce economic resources. What is at stake with the resource of micro-credit is how this reformulation of gendered norms will occur. In the case of Maria, as long as she is engaging in movement outside of her household that is still related to the well-being of her household, she and her

husband are able to validate the broaching of one social norm (Maria's movement) with the strength of another (her commitment to her family).

An interview with Magdalena demonstrates how some women in the micro-credit cooperatives were able to negotiate their gender roles with their husbands, and how this then meant that women had different expectations of *men's* behavior. I asked her if her family supported her work in the cooperative and she responded saying: *Yes, yes my husband supports me because when I have to go to a meeting sometimes he will stay home and take care of the kids. At the very least, he is not opposed to me going. He knows that I have to go, and if he's not busy, he'll help me. But a lot of my friends don't have this, they say that their husbands won't let them come [to meetings]. But they should let them go. Because if we want to benefit, everyone has to work, not just me. If the husband supports the idea of his wife getting credit, he has to agree that he is going to help out too.*" For Magdalena, joining the cooperative in the name of contributing to her family's welfare allowed her to feel morally justified in expecting different things out of her husband *and* other men in the community. However, this was certainly not the case for all women. As one woman and her friend joked:

Holly: Does your family support your work?

Elena: At first, no. But now they do. They don't say anything. They used to say, "Oh there she goes again! There she goes to her meeting!" or "You're going away and leaving us alone?" But now they don't say that.

Holly: They got used to you leaving?

Elena's friend: No, all of her sons got married!!

The women's cooperative was a place where many women felt supported in making new claims regarding resources at the communal level as well as in their households. Magdalena told me the following story about how women of her cooperative decided to ask their town officials (all men) for the creation of public bathrooms in the community. According to Magdalena, women had never gotten together to make claims on local government before. She told me:

*Men never take into account the things that women need, their necessities. They say 'ay, this isn't necessary, this other thing is more important.' The first time we [the women of the cooperative] went to a meeting, we went to request a place for public bathrooms in the community. The men there told us that this request wasn't necessary. That it is more necessary to make a fence or something like that—the things that interest them, right? They said that bathrooms would be ok, but maybe for a different occasion. They said their thing (whatever it was) was more important. But, what saved us that time was that the commissioner supported us. He said that what the women want is not really necessary, but it is important in a way because it is a necessity of the community, including for men themselves. Public bathrooms are a necessity in our community. So, even though all the other men were set on ignoring us and didn't want to pay us any attention, we came out in first place!!!*

While the president recognized that the woman's needs weren't really *that* necessary for the men, in validating their argument, he recognized that women represented *other* needs not often taken into consideration. Thus, both women and men were able to justify women's mobilization by seeing it as being for the family (albeit on a communal level).

The cooperative was also a place where many women felt that they were experiencing personal growth. It was a place where women made new connections and where they learned how to share their concerns with others. As Tomasa told me: *“I feel stronger now. Like I have more support. We talk, and if you go there really down, you can talk with your friends and then you feel better, not so alone. With uplifted spirits. Sometimes I feel rally down, I go to a meeting, I chat and stay awhile. Then I feel stronger. This is a big help. Before I didn’t have any support like this.”* Another woman, Lizbet, related to me how her cooperative gave her the strength to think and speak for herself: *It’s made a difference also because I feel like I used to be an old rag, you know? I feel that as a woman, I am advancing more. Before I was timid. I was fearful of everything. Everything embarrassed me, especially speaking to people. And now I still have fear, but I put it aside, because I have to continue on, move ahead. Yes, it has really helped me personally.”* Likewise, Clara told me a similar story about how she enjoyed her cooperative, but reminded me that women’s participation in the cooperatives, while having important impacts on women’s lives, were still certainly a domain of contestation over gender issues: *“I feel like I’m realizing my ideas, my dreams, because I feel more free. Because like I told you, I never used to leave the house. And now I can express how I feel and what I feel like doing. And with the permission that my husband gives me to do all this, I feel good.”*

These interviews, while providing a very partial account of life in Cuquío, demonstrate how micro-credit is both shaping and being shaped by gendered economic norms, i.e. gendered moral economies. In discussing how women and men in Cuquío are negotiating appropriate gender norms with respect to micro-credit, we can see how micro-credit programs are understood, mediated, and made meaningful in everyday practices.

Likewise, analyzing how men and women modify their gendered expectations surrounding the scarce resource of micro-credit shows how gender and economic norms are continually changing processes. Through an examination of these processes, we are able to conceive of women in Cuquío neither as victims of capitalist domination nor as pristine agents of a non-capitalist logic. Instead, we see them as people navigating precarious economic situations through complex negotiations regarding communal and individual norms and identities.

## CONCLUSION

A gendered moral economies framework is particularly useful when thinking about micro-credit for several reasons. First, through an emphasis on how gender and economic norms are profoundly social relationships that constitute each other, we are unable to think in terms of a binary separation between a realm of “culture” from the “economy.” By showing us how women are never “outside” the economy to be “brought in,” a gendered moral economies perspective demonstrates how even when women aren’t directly involved in markets, gendered norms of economic activity are working to shape economic relations. This provides a very different starting ground from which to theorize women’s agency in micro-credit programs, painting women neither as victims of nor stubborn opponents to micro-credit logic; rather it indicates how micro-credit programs can simultaneously be taken up and challenged to promote new types of gender relations. Second, the focus on gendered moral economies thus shifts the analysis away from the *effects* of micro-credit programs upon a static group of women to one of understanding the power-laden *processes* through which micro-credit interacts with socially constructed and constantly changing categories of

gender and the economy. Third, through examining how gender norms and norms regarding “proper” economic behavior constitute each other, we are also able to challenge the “naturalization” of women’s caretaking roles that almost all micro-credit literature fails to interrogate. Instead, we can begin to understand how women’s care for the family is bound up in complex relations of care, morality, and responsibility rather than a simple innate virtue. Finally, not only does a gendered moral economy perspective allow us to articulate a different type of criticism of micro-credit, it also provides a more provocative framework for understanding the potential political and economic possibilities of micro-credit programs.



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