

Reclaiming Public Spaces in the Informal Economy: Migrant Mothers who Defy Gender Traditions in Cochabamba, Bolivia

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ABSTRACT

In the city of Cochabamba, Bolivia, mothers from the *campo* have become the engine of the Bolivian economy and leaders in their communities. The issue: they work in the informal sector, which is disapproved by the government and general population. Families from the countryside have lost their homes and traditional means of living as a product of policies in favor of foreign competition. Mothers have become the leaders of their homes and found jobs in the city that have further burdened their role responsibilities. Since there are few safe work opportunities that support indigenous migrant mothers' maternal identities, they create their own jobs in spaces traditionally dominated by *machista* values. Despite intersecting obstacles of gender, class and race, mothers are resilient and capable of redefining spaces and reframing narratives of their motherhood. Drawing on ethnographic data, this article depicts how migrant mothers achieve empowerment, survival and control of their identities thanks to the agency they have found in traditional employment, entrepreneurship and cooperative entrepreneurship within the informal sector, as well as support from non-governmental organizations.

Keywords: motherhood, Bolivia, informal economy, identity, intersectionality

In 2018, Bolivian President Evo Morales boasted that Bolivia was an economic leader in Latin America as its GDP rose by 3.8%. Shortly after, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) released a study on “shadow economies” that took the nation’s pride away. According to this study (Medina and Schneider 2018), Bolivia’s informal sector is 62.3% of its economy, the largest in the world. The IMF warned Bolivians that “informality is linked to smuggling,” and the Private Employers’ Confederation of Bolivia predicted that one to 1.5 points of GDP were due to “smuggling” (El Deber 2018). Working class Bolivians were outraged that a sector misleadingly known for avoiding taxes and selling drugs was accredited for the country’s prosperity (Diario Opinión 2018). The IMF neglected to report that the informal market in Bolivia is really a “domain of constant flux...between the legal and the illegal,” with most jobs operating between both sectors (Goldstein 2016, 23). “Nearly 80 percent of employment” is in the informal sector and “about 70 percent of Bolivian workers are not registered in the nation’s pension system,” indicating that they are informally employed (33-34). More importantly, most informal employees are migrant mothers from the countryside who have been displaced from their homes. With few safe or possible employment prospects, mothers create their own jobs in public spaces traditionally dominated by men. Migrant mothers prove to be resilient individually and collectively as they take back power with their motherhood in social and economic spheres that once tried to exclude them.

As Adolfo Arispe, the Cochabamba Director of Labor, says, “Without a doubt, women are the engine of the informal economy” (Nava 2017). The UN Women Bolivia organization

estimates that 70% of women who work do so in the informal sector, and The World Bank says more women enter the informal sector than men (only 58% join) (El Día 2017; The World Bank 2015, 16). Although they make up the majority of this lively sector that fuels the economy, they do not receive the same rights that women in the formal sector receive from the government. Cecilia Estrada, a sociology professor and women’s advocate in Bolivia, states in an interview with the Bolivian newspaper *Opinión* that the informal sector is a reflection of the inequality within the formal sector between men and women (Nava 2017). Mothers, specifically, are either unable to make enough money in the formal sector or are denied access because of a lack of education, discrimination or, more typically, responsibility to their home; they then are forced to generate their own economic resources in the informal sector (Nava 2017). This article focuses on the mothers who, against all odds, discover how to utilize the informal sector and become community leaders, transforming public spaces into thriving businesses that defy gendered traditions.

Thus, it is important to understand how motherhood impacts the identity of migrant mothers. Bolivian women have no singular standpoint on the maternal role, and so the definition and practice of motherhood can differ for those from the countryside, who experience different intersectional conflicts of race, class and gender, and those from the city, who have a dissimilar relationship to political power structures (Bailey 1994, 195). Migrant mothers’ identity can best be understood according to Patricia Hill Collin’s work on Black motherhood in the United States. According to Collins, motherhood refers to “the importance of working for physical survival of children and community; the dialectics of power and powerlessness in structuring mothering patterns; and the significance of self-definition in constructing individual and collective racial identities” (1996, 7). In other words, the core components of motherwork for migrant mothers in Bolivia are characterized by ensuring the survival of their children (who frequently face danger in the shape of medical access, drugs and violence), retaining and loving their identities in a society that devalues them,

and being able to find power in jobs that try to exploit them (Bailey 1994, 193-5).

Oppression manifests itself distinctly in the maternal roles of migrant mothers opposed to others. For example, migrant mothers are taught that it is selfish to put themselves first; in order to be a good mother, they must exhaust their mental and physical health for family survival, mistaking exploitation for altruism (Collins 2006, 143). Oppression also manifests itself in how employers and spouses abuse mothers' altruism, knowing that they lack the resources and sometimes the courage to defend themselves. Likewise, Collins (2006) states that mothers' identity formation stems from the work that they do as a part of a collective, but gendered violence in the countryside isolates women from community interaction and prohibits healthy self-identity formation. For this reason, it is crucial to understand how mothers can manipulate the informal economy to combat stereotypes about their identity while fostering their own relationship to this social role.

That being said, the IMF's report (Medina and Schneider 2018) also neglects its own role in the displacement of mothers from the countryside to the city and into the informal sector. In the 1980s and 1990s, Eurocentric policy-makers from the IMF and The World Bank promised to give the Bolivian administration loans to resolve national debt if they adopted neoliberal policy agendas, which favor free market competition to promote capitalist development (such as President Goni's policy implementation that privatized hydrocarbons and water) (Puente 2017; Goldstein 2016, 20, 39). Many Bolivians lost their jobs and traditional means of living in the countryside as competition from foreign companies grew. "Dispossessed of their land, resources, and jobs" (Goldstein 2016, 39), Bolivians were forced to look for work in the city. "In 1950, only 34 percent of Bolivians lived in cities...that percentage is expected to climb to 75 percent by 2020" (Goldstein 2016, 39). Because Bolivian men lost their jobs, mothers were burdened with finding new sources of income to support their families (Draper 2008). In 2013 the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated that men's participation in the labor force was static, but women's

participation was increasing (World Bank 2015, 15). The ILO found that 64% of women were participating in the workforce, and indigenous women were participating at a higher rate (62%) than non-indigenous women (55%) (15). Neoliberalism's high-competition ideology increased employers' demands "for flexible, dependent workers" and "made women an easy target for lax and insufficient labor protections" (Draper 2008, n.p.). The informal economy reflects not only the gender gap in the formal sector as Estrada claims (Nava 2017), but also the marginalization of indigenous migrant Bolivian mothers in the global economy (Draper 2008).

Although women's roles have expanded outside of the home, their domestic duties have yet to adapt to their new identities and obligations. The World Bank (2015) stated that "Bolivian women spend on average four times more time performing domestic tasks than men, and still spend almost 38 hours a week in labor market work" (men spend 47 hours) (20). Symbolic violence, an invisible form of domination in which injustice is perpetuated and normalized by society and misrecognized as problematic, enforces but does not explain gendered beliefs that women should spend more time in the home serving their families (Krais 1993, 172). Symbolic violence is apparent as Bolivian women drop out of school, disengage in political or social organizations, work in disadvantageous conditions, neglect their mental health, and give up their self-autonomy for their families (Soria 2016). In Bolivia, among other reasons, *machismo*, the belief that men are superior to women (adjective: *machista*), normalizes excluding women from the community, isolating them in the home and using physical or emotional violence against them (Draper 2008). Migrant mothers, hence, are suffocated by *machista* expectations of their social roles, symbolic violence that reinforces such ideas, and a global market that takes advantage of their identities' vulnerability.

This article exemplifies the resilience of Bolivian mothers from the countryside who have re-invented the informal sector as a tool to assert space in a labor force that has notoriously mistreated them. It examines how

migrant maternal identities respond in relation to traditional employment, entrepreneurship, and cooperative entrepreneurship in the informal sector. It demonstrates how self-employment in the informal sector and non-governmental aid can support mothers to defy gendered expectations and become their own providers and community leaders. Depending on the type of self-employment, women may be able to regain a sense of value that was previously dehumanized and reclaim power over the narrative of their maternal identities while exploring their identity individually and collectively as mothers.

Methodology

This article relies on the use of anonymous vignettes from life stories, quotes from interviews and observations from fieldnotes to create a reflective and authentic platform for the voices of the women who shared their stories with me. Only three voices are used in this article, but their stories speak to the thirty-five other mothers who I met and formally interviewed who shared similar feelings and experiences. Thanks to the help of the non-profit institution proyecto Trabajo Digno (pTD), which provides free assistance to both women and men to find a dignified job, start an entrepreneurship, pursue legal action against exploitation, and receive psychological help or workplace training, I was able to gain the trust of women who either had just found the organization, were currently working with the organization or long ago had received help from the organization. With pTD's help, I was able to meet women who were searching for a job, starting or owned their own business or were part of a knitting cooperative. I conducted participant observation for a total of three months as I worked alongside the head of the job-seeking sector at pTD, assisted with and participated in workshops designed to develop skills needed to obtain a safe job and understand one's rights, conducted interviews with the employees, attended weekly meetings as well as monthly workshops with the staff, and attended the organization's celebratory events with its employees, patrons, volunteers and participants. Regardless of the relationships that these mothers may have had with the organization, they were their own

agents in changing their lives; pTD assisted them by providing the educational tools, resources and encouragement that all Bolivians should have access to, but which are commonly denied to those who are vulnerable.

It is important to note that there are a few elements not discussed at length in this article that deserve consideration. Firstly, although I interviewed a few women from the working class, my research focuses primarily on mothers with children who come from the *campo* or countryside to work in the city and have little to no support from a male partner. This article focuses on motherwork from this select location so as to not overgeneralize motherhood and disregard the different experiences of mothers (Bailey 1994, 195). The relationships that these mothers have are hard to define; most have had children at a young age and are unmarried, but they find new temporary relationships to relieve social and economic hardship. Many significant others may even live with the women, but never contribute to their home. Additionally, the *campo* has fewer employment opportunities for women because of economic changes and gender biases. For this reason, this article focuses on migrant mothers.

Secondly, the work experiences Bolivian women encounter differ greatly depending on how race, age, class and motherhood intersect in their identity. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991, 1242) explains, we must acknowledge intragroup differences in identity politics so as not to oversimplify their unique experiences. In the city, jobs are divided into gender roles and service-based jobs, which heightens a mother's struggle for power. Usually, more feminine jobs include domestic tasks like cleaning, cooking, and serving. Employers limit mothers' options as they desire to hire young, unmarried women. Employers see older, married women as being less docile and committed to their job (Fisher 2018). They also see children as a risk to continuous work, forcing mothers to search for places to leave their children.

Similarly, as argued by Crenshaw (1991, 1244), violence against mothers from the *campo* can only be understood by looking at gender and race through an intersectional framework because they impact a woman's

employment experience together rather than individually. It is for this reason that mothers from the *campo* have a harder time finding work than women from the city. Two-thirds of women from the *campo* identify as having indigenous roots, speaking Quechua, coming from a lower socioeconomic class, having little access to education (40% are illiterate), and having on average six children (Draper 2008). Characteristics such as illiteracy and many children reflect the violence that indigenous women face. The majority of mothers interviewed explained that they could not finish their education because their parents forced them to stay at home and raise their brothers or to work so that their brothers could go to school. One woman confided in me that she was at risk of health problems because her husband repeatedly impregnated her. Many mothers explained that they may not be able to control their husbands, but they could control their bodies by secretly undergoing a birth control implant.

Some migrant mothers can leave behind the countryside, learn to speak Spanish and become educated, but discrimination will continue to follow them—for instance, non-campesino citizens label them by how Quechua influences their accents, how they dress indigenously, and so on. Discrimination denies migrant mothers equal opportunities in labor. In order to survive, they enter the informal sector where there is a constant demand for workers but zero protection from the government, which normally would include maternity leaves, medical protection and laws governing work hours, days and holidays. The abuse does not disappear, though, as employers in the formal sector can also take advantage of mothers; for example, forcing them to work more hours without extra pay. As the lawyer of pTD explained when I interviewed him, the majority of people in Bolivia are unaware of their rights and the legal action that they can pursue, making them vulnerable to employers.

On a similar note, the informal and formal sector are heavily intertwined, hence why it will be called (in)formal in this article, but the government forms “categorical definitions of people and practices” (Goldstein 2016, 75-76) to

retain power structures and make informality look invisible. Elites have the privilege to distribute power and resources by dictating what jobs are legal and illegal and whose rights are recognized. An illegal job can be one in which someone sells legal goods without a permit for the land they sell on, and a legal job might entail someone selling illegal items with a property permit (75-76). Because of this, the police and state authorities will perform illegal seizures and demand payments from workers doing what they deem to be illegal jobs. They will call them primitive, dirty, and so on (77-79). State officials maintain the city’s power dynamics by abusing vulnerable workers and justifying their actions through dehumanization.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge my own privilege and positionality in conducting this research. Knowing that my research was for an academic study may have impacted how comfortable women felt sharing information. It is possible that questions during the interviews, conducted in Spanish rather than Quechua, were answered narrowly with the truths that they thought I wanted to hear. There is power that comes with my position as a US scholar because I am the one collecting information and telling their stories. This work serves as a platform to deconstruct such power and display their voices.

Finding Employment in the (In)formal Sector

I feel very overwhelmed, but in my mind, I have to keep moving forward. And I’m tired, but I still have to get myself up and move forward. I have to clean the clothing, cook and go to work for eight hours a day. *I work*. I arrive [home] at night and keep doing it all over again for my kids...There are days that I feel so sick and I’m so tired, but I can’t stop. There is no one else who can [take care of my kids]. (Juana)

As Juana’s quote hints, traditional employment—working for someone else—in the (in)formal sector is not the best option for most migrant mothers. Historically, women came to Cochabamba for social mobility, “working as housekeepers, cooks, and babysitters for wealthy families on the city’s

north side" (Goldstein 2016, 141). Yet, traditional employment offers poor wages and maltreatment for migrant mothers (Goldstein 2016, 141). Currently, Bolivia is ranked 118 out of 130 countries for the worst gender wage gap with men earning 50% more than women, making alternative options to traditional employment seem promising (El Día 2017; The World Bank 2015, 18-19). Traditional employment threatens migrant mothers' identities because they are unable to work and raise their children at the same time, but it does offer agency, independence and an escape from the burdens at home. Although advertised as liberation for all women, traditional employment continues to be oppressive and exploitative for migrant mothers. Juana's life-story demonstrates the dehumanization and stress that mothers may experience as a result of assumed maternal expectations that permit abuse from employers in the (in)formal sector and abuse from their families. Juana's story shows how migrant mothers struggle to survive while maintaining pride and value in their identities.

Juana was 22 years old when she moved to the city of Cochabamba to find work. She did not speak Spanish very well and only felt comfortable speaking in her native tongue of Aymara. She never finished school, and so she struggled to read and write. Eventually, she met her ex-husband, and they had three children during their 19 years together. Her life soon became complicated; she was no longer able to think about what she wanted to do, but rather about what her children and husband needed and if she lacked it. Shaking her head, Juana told me that she and her husband truly could never get along; he treated her poorly. Choosing her words, she said that he kept her isolated in the house, refused to give her money, and denied her an education. She always worked two jobs in addition to her husband's job to help her family make ends meet. Her third job, she claimed, is being a mother. She helps her children with their homework, watches over them, cooks, cleans, washes laundry and so on. Thinking about her husband's pension, a benefit from the formal sector, she sighed. It never contributed enough, but it was at least something and now it was gone. It is not unusual for Bolivian mothers to

be the sole providers for their children or the primary breadwinners of a family (Goldsmith 2016, 143). It was this year that she found out that her ex-husband was cheating on her and had a four-year-old child with another woman. It was then that Juana's husband abandoned their family, which is not uncommon among migrant mothers, and claimed their home, leaving Juana and her children homeless.

Consequently, Juana had no choice but to move her children and herself temporarily into the home of her abusive stepbrother. Looking at the empty glass sitting on the table between us, she murmured, "He treats me poorly and I have to hold it all in." She explained that she has nowhere else to put her children and cannot turn to her family. Since her husband disappeared, her children are always crying because they are suffering. She is also suffering, but she forces herself to stay calm so that her children see her as strong. She looked at her daughter sitting in the chair next to us and said, "They help me through it [the pain]." She justifies her suffering and shoulders the burden, like most migrant mothers, for her family's survival. In Bolivia, 7 out of 10 women suffer from domestic violence and it is estimated that one in every two women have suffered from some type of violence during their lives (Villegas 2018). Juana's experience at home is symbolic of how gendered violence suppresses mothers' identities and puts them in dangerous situations.

Moreover, migrant mothers' identities are not only exploited in the home, but also in the labor force. Before Juana's husband left, she worked in a store selling furniture. It was her only job at the time because it required her to work from 8:00 am until 8:00 pm. Her boss normally refused to pay her on time and at one point stopped paying her altogether; but she needed the money desperately, so she came to pTD, an organization she heard of through word-of-mouth, for legal assistance. After speaking to the organization's lawyer, she learned that she was being exploited. She was working 12 hours a day and not being paid over-time past the legal eight-hour shift. Her boss would refuse to provide her with a glass of water or let her sit down during a shift. Sometimes, she was forced to come in on a

Sunday, a day culturally meant for family, or a holiday, a day when work is over-time, without receiving any pay and would be threatened with losing her job if she refused. Juana's boss was verbally abusive, too. "Sometimes I just wanted to run and leave, but I would hold it in—what my boss would say to me. I would get stressed from it, but I would have to hold it all in." Juana added, referring to all of her previous bosses, "They will make you return to re-do something and tell you all the things you're doing wrong. I can't disagree or defend myself. I have to be silent." Juana worried about what would happen to her family's financial security if she lost her job, and so she pushed through her pains. Her boss took advantage of her because they knew that Juana was unaware of her rights and desperate for money.

Juana grew to believe the words that came out of her bosses' mouths. She began to believe that this was the treatment she deserved and something that she alone must face. "They tell me I don't need the money...I don't need the resources and they make me feel silly," she explained. "They don't think about how they affect you...they don't know I have another job and kids, and they don't care for us...". Juana felt her identity as a mother was in jeopardy as she sacrificed self-worth for family survival. As both a marginalized indigenous woman and mother from the *campo*, Juana's abuse was a product of the intersections of racism and sexism (Crenshaw 1994, 1248). Like many other migrant mothers, Juana experienced cultural barriers, distrust with abusive state officials, and lower access to resources both in Quechua and overall. Her experiences at home and in the workforce have left her unable to view herself positively, but she does believe that her experiences serve as a lesson for her children of what not to do, as most mothers believe (Goldsmith 2016, 206). Juana told me that she is determined not to let her children end up "like her."

After pTD helped her to learn her rights and search for safe jobs, Juana has independently found two jobs that allow her to devote more time to her family, but at the expense of earning sufficient money. She works two days out of the week and takes sewing classes so that she can eventually pursue a self-employed

career as a sewing instructor. Like most working mothers from her town, Juana does not know of any available nurseries nor does she have the financial ability to put her children in one while she is away. Most mothers like Juana fear leaving their children unattended at home because of their neighborhood's high crime rates (Goldstein 2016, 201-204). Juana clarified, "It is hard to get a job when you have a family, no?...It [is] so difficult to work as a woman because you need to help them with homework and go to work at the same time." The information she learned at pTD has inspired her to be stronger for her kids and be a role-model. She is investing in a future job where she can be her own boss and bring her children with her to work.

Furthermore, it is important to weigh both the benefits and consequences of traditional employment. In terms of benefits, Juana has found work to be an escape from the stresses that plague her at home. Like most mothers, she feels as if she can finally breathe when at work because she is in control of her own life. Before Juana's husband left, she thought that a woman's role was to be with her kids in the home. She elaborated by saying, "My husband did not approve of me working or studying, and now I see that women should do all of those things." Juana's jobs have "confounded the categories that serve to organize *machista* culture" and place women, both indigenous and from the *campo*, in the home rather than a public space (Goldstein 2016, 142-143). Nevertheless, Juana struggles to see her work as a mother as successful. Worrying about sounding selfish, she whispered, "I hope they understand me. I know there are times that they are upset, and they say to me 'You're never in the house.' And I know that there are families with moms and dads that can do that, and I want to do that. But if you work, you have to go always."

Although traditional employment has presented Juana with agency and power, it has not been the most conducive to building her sense of self or freedom from gendered expectations. Traditional employment has made her subject to abuse from the exploitation of her maternal identity. Juana was fortunate to have found an organization like

pTD to help her. However, as the founder of pTD, Martine Greischer, told me in an interview, most mothers from the *campo* are isolated from the community and unaware of organizations that provide help, and those who speak Quechua are unlikely to travel to the city for help. Juana looks forward to a future in sewing, believing that self-employment may relieve some of the tensions employment could not solve.

Finding Employment in Entrepreneurship

I can be with my children. I can take care of them; I can go to meetings for their school; and it is a job that I can enjoy. Normally, you can't with jobs. *This* is more freedom. Sometimes it takes a toll on me because I have to open [my store] at six in the morning and close it at 9 at night. It can be tiring, but whatever...you have the advantage to be there with your children. (María)

As María's life-story illustrates, entrepreneurship in the informal economy can disrupt gender norms that toxify motherhood and limit women's agency. A woman can become her own boss, learn new skills, and leave the house to work and interact with the community as a leader. At the same time, when a woman creates her own job, she may have the opportunity to determine her own hours, who she works with or for, where she works, what she does and if she can bring her children to work. Although a woman may be able to leave the home and interact with outsiders, her job might also increase her ability to spend time at home and fortify detrimental and burdensome expectations of what her maternal identity entails, which María's reflections on her identity show. Similarly, according to a study on metropolitan areas in Bolivia by *Ciudadanía*, 64% of Cochabambinos said they want to start their own business and 62.7% said they lack the money to start one (Avendaño 2017). María's experience demonstrates that starting a business can be inaccessible, particularly for an indigenous woman from a lower socioeconomic class.

That being said, one of the obstacles to entrepreneurship is that most migrant mothers do not know that it is a viable option. Most

mothers see entrepreneurship as a dream, something far out of their reach. Experiences resulting from their intersectional identities have taught migrant mothers that their place in the labor market is to work *for* business owners, not *as* business owners. According to Martine Greischer, approximately 50% of the people that work in the informal sector are actually employees of someone else's entrepreneurship. Small businesses, like fruit vendors in the open-air market the *Cancha*, are often owned by one person who has various stands with different "girls" to work at each one. One step to breaking these patterns is educating mothers about their capacity to be their own bosses; however, finding a source of inspiration for this path may be difficult.

For this reason, María believed that she was blessed the day that Aldeas Infantiles SOS, a NGO which she described as helping "mostly children—abandoned or in need," came knocking on her door. It was not by coincidence that Aldeas Infantiles SOS found her; the organization was informed of the town's at-risk families, and María and her husband were penniless at the time since he could not work for months due to an injury. The organization had formed a partnership with the mayor to start a nursery so that mothers could leave their children and work to survive. Following this, the NGO contacted María to see if she would be interested in starting a small store for the community. They turned her dreams into a reality with a donation of 1,000 bolivianos, a table, and a shelf. María explained, "I did not have the capital to be able to open it before—I wanted to—but I couldn't." Additionally, the NGO introduced her to pTD to find additional support and another shelf; pTD offered her assistance through a series of workshops and one-on-one meetings with their business expert. María recalled that pTD taught her how to organize her finances, know what money to keep in the store and what money to take out for eating or spending on her family. María started her business because she was fortunate to have access to two organizations that most migrant mothers are unaware of. Despite receiving financial assistance from the organizations, María needed to take out a loan from the bank and discover how to run her business alone through trial and error with her community.

Now, María is her own boss and runs a small community store from a room in the front of her house. She sells everything that the neighborhood needs—from cookies to pasta—while taking care of her family at the same time. She starts her day by preparing her family breakfast, buying fresh milk and bread at 5:30 am from the delivery man, sending her husband off to work at 6:30 am, and dropping her youngest off at school by 7:30 am. Around lunch time, her children return to the house to eat and then join her as she works. Gathered at the table, they point a finger at one another laughing out the words “*tú toca*,” or “your turn,” to assist when a customer arrives. For María, the fact that she can bond with her children at work is the reason why she could never return to traditional employment where she “was treated less” and like a “slave” for “not having studied”. María’s job as a store owner enables her to survive and to teach her children pride in their identities. Equally as important, she feels validated because her family contributes to her work and recognizes her efforts.

On a similar note, María’s store has earned her validation within her community because members depend on her for help. Before the store, she felt “useless” because she “wasn’t doing anything” and “lonely” because “no one was home” and she “couldn’t leave”. Now, María feels happy and important because people want her help. For instance, one day a client asked her what they should do for their daughter’s upset stomach, and María assisted her by making a remedy of cornstarch mixed with coca cola from her store. She felt validated when the parent came back to thank her for her success. On a different day, a group of boys, whose mother was unable to leave from work, asked María if she could make them fried eggs for lunch and wait to be paid. María happily cooked for them. They were shocked that she trusted them, and she laughed, telling them that she knew they would return. María knew that she was essential to their well-being. Another day, a woman with a baby came to her store to buy cooking gas. María did not want the woman to carry the tank alone, so she took it to the woman’s house and installed it for her. The woman was so grateful that she gave María a plate full of corn. “I like that I can help in this way,” María remarked several times. Using her

agency, María has created a job that allows her to nourish her maternal role in a way that traditional employment could not. Additionally, her job promotes positive self-reflection due to her community and family validating her work efforts.

As she succeeds financially and socially, María plans to expand her store. She wants to add fresh vegetables and meat and, if possible, start a side-business where she can sell fresh fruit juices to the community. Obstacles such as taking care of her youngest child prevent her from expanding the store as much and as quickly as she would want. She hopes that her children will continue to work alongside her so that the business can grow faster and her children can see her succeed. “[I want them to work] like myself, with my own strength...I want that they explore and have opportunities to work far from here,” she stated. María wants her children to explore jobs that give them the same pride in their identities that she has discovered from her own business. María’s job has helped her to envision a future for herself and to recognize her strengths.

She expressed, “Yes, I feel more independent. It’s not that much waiting on your husband. You can still serve him, but before when the income was just my husband’s, I would walk in the street and I wouldn’t buy a single thing alone—not even a drink. But, now, at least, I will buy a drink or something I want... It makes me happy that I can do that.” Entrepreneurship has provided her with a sense of happiness and agency to reclaim her power through financial independence and broken gender stereotypes.

In spite of her successes in relation to her maternal role, María has difficulty seeing her individual accomplishments. When given the task to describe herself, responding first with “mother,” her second thought was “*Me falta*,” or “I lack”. María shared that she never had the opportunity to attend school. Now, entering her late forties, she felt as though it was too late to fulfill her dream of receiving an education, a common feeling among migrant mothers. The influence of power dynamics throughout her life has led María to believe that education is a marker of success and her lack thereof makes her inferior and unsuccessful. When María has

to take money out of the store's savings because her husband had failed to find work, she said, "I fear that it makes what I earn not enough". This example illustrates that María often shoulders the burden of being her family's primary income provider. Even when her husband is at fault for not contributing to their family's economic stability, she still considers herself as the one not doing enough. María was unable to describe herself outside of her maternal role and what she lacks. This is likely because the degree to which her family relies on her as a savior has intensified. Her family holds her to an even higher regard as she continues to succeed individually as the one who physically and financially provides for and protects the family. As a result, her self-image can waiver between positive, when she recognizes her strength as a mother, community member and provider, or negative, when she struggles to see her individual accomplishments because her family is at risk of survival.

María's story provides an example of how entrepreneurship can provide women with better opportunities to compete in the market and grow emotionally, socially and economically if given access to the right tools, like pTD. María described feelings of independence because she makes her own money and can spend it however she wants, but she still puts her family first. She also felt validated because her family and the people in her community recognize her successes and efforts. However, she cannot view herself outside of her limitations defined by her social context. María explores relationships outside of her home when she helps her community, but she never works alongside a community to test Collins' (1996) idea of women building their own identities through collective motherwork.

Finding Employment in Entrepreneurial Cooperatives (Co-ops)

Before [the co-op], I just worked and was stuck in the house. But then, with the girls, I made contacts and I could leave at least once a week; I could talk to and meet people and go to one place or another—and travel. I have traveled to Santa Cruz and sold things...

I have been able to meet so many people.
(Sonia)

As Sonia describes, cooperative structures can become powerful tools for women's movements that provide agency to redefine motherhood and dismantle gender traditions. Cooperatives can become spaces for women to discover new skills and leadership roles, engage and heal in supportive and social spaces, challenge the notion that a woman's place is at home, escape a labor system that devalues them, and build on their collective identity in order to empower their individual identity. Sonia's story depicts how individual transformation of self-identity can stem from collective growth, and it reveals the exploitative nature of the international market and its neoliberal policies that egalitarian women's cooperatives encounter.

Sonia was never able to finish her high school degree, but she knew how to weave. When she was little, her mother and her would weave together. However, after dropping out of high school, Sonia decided to go to Argentina to sell vegetables. She wanted to find work far away from her home, but soon her mother died and she was forced to come back with her newborn baby, two children, and husband to take care of her mother's home. After attending a course for weaving in the city one day, Sonia met a group of women from the countryside who were forming a weaving cooperative or co-op. Twelve years have passed and she continues to work in this community. In response to who founded the group, she said, "We say that we have created it [together]." Sonia and her group do not like to attribute its foundation to one person because each member is valued in creating its whole.

Similarly, although the cooperative has a hierarchy of jobs, the labels do not define who is more important. "We have a president, a treasurer—all of that. We have a teacher—we have positions like that. People do what their abilities allow, but they are all equal in terms of importance," Sonia explained. "There is no leader because we are all leaders". They take turns creating orders and split the income evenly no matter who contributed more or less for that order because they value supporting each other over doing better than one another.

For many of the mothers in the group that experienced pain from an abusive job or relationship, forming their own rules and being seen as equal has become a liberating process. They are able to affirm their value and importance.

As well, the group learned how to organize themselves through weekly, sometimes twice a week, meetings; they also learned how to network and sell their products competitively at the fairs they travel to. They learned how to conduct their work at home in order to satisfy their work as mothers. At the same time, these women oppose gendered labor divisions that try to isolate them inside of their homes by leaving their households for meetings and traveling outside of their communities to sell goods (Stephen 2005, 256). The cooperative enables the women to find agency in leadership positions and to develop new skills like financing and marketing. They find power in deciding what they want to do as well as who they do their work for and with (255). They even break their own internalized stigmas on their identity as they enter together into political and economic spaces that were once denied to them. As marginalized women, many were taught to believe that they were not worthy of entering certain spaces. One woman in a co-op told me that she was once too afraid to enter a bank because she was a "*cholita*", or indigenous woman, but after entering several times with her colleagues she no longer felt uncomfortable going alone. The group allows women to meet people who experience the same struggles, and their socialization outside of the group encourages them to see themselves as equals to others.

Furthermore, the structure of the cooperative is built on a framework of motherwork that enables the women to see each other as part of a family in which they can support and embolden one another. Ariella Rotramel's (2017) *'This Is Like Family': Activist-Survivor Histories and Motherwork* refers to Patricia Hill Collin's definition of motherhood and explains that motherwork "recognizes that individual survival, empowerment, and identity require group survival, empowerment, and identity"; however, motherwork can extend past familial relationships and can be used as a

public action, like with the cooperative (51). Sonia, reflecting on her relationship with the group, said, "The way that we meet and behave with one another is like family. Or, if there is nothing to do, we check-in with one another and see how we are doing...how can we support each other." They support one another in a way that did not exist for themselves before the cooperative was formed (61). Their shared experiences of abuse have created traumatic scars that the cooperative allows them to heal and grow from together (60). They teach one another that they are good enough, that they are valuable, and that they do not deserve to be abused just to survive (61). Thus, the cooperative enables mothers to engage in a job that values collective survival, empowerment and identity growth.

Sonia, for example, believes that she would not be who she is today without her "girls". "I changed a lot," she asserted. "Before I always worked, yeah. But after I joined the women, I knew everything. I became well-known and did a lot of workshops. I couldn't express myself [before], I couldn't talk, but now I can talk a lot... I'm more open now. I can't tell you how I was before. I just would weave for myself and I couldn't respond to anyone." As Sonia explains, she felt herself change once she joined the group. She grew to become confident and she found her voice by communicating with other mothers in the cooperative's weekly meetings and with foreigners on topics such as finances; Sonia was also able to challenge race, gender, and class based stereotypes that had restricted her from accessing resources like the bank. Sonia explained, "I can value myself...this [job] is for me." She works for her family's survival to succeed as a mother, but she stays in her cooperative regardless of its issues because it provides her with a community that she cannot access elsewhere.

In fact, at the time of this research study Sonia was working part time at another job selling items because her family's survival was at risk while she worked part time with her girls. "I can't leave them" she repeated at the thought of quitting. Since she has to leave her house more often to work and her income had declined, her family was regularly upset with her for not being home. So, her first thought

when describing who she is was as a "*llorona*" or weeper. The stress in her household would bring her to tears over the smallest of things because she feared she was not doing enough for her family. Both her and her husband work half time, and so she felt responsible for the decline in their income. Her reaction resembles María's. However, she quickly added, "I am very *parlanchina* [talkative]. I can talk about anything now." Thinking more positively, she elaborated, "I am friendly and good with people" and "I know a lot of people in the streets. I talk in Quechua too. I communicate with the group and other people from the *campo*." She even joked that she can convince her husband to clean the house or cook when she is too lazy. Ending her thoughts, she quipped, "I am always crying though." Sonia's answer reflects the tension that her family's survival puts on her new dynamic identity as a mother.

While the neoliberal market has brought communities of women together in cooperatives—spaces that they have designed themselves with occasional advice from organizations like pTD—it has also broken them apart, destroyed their trust in one another and caused them to feel exploited or abused once more. The global hegemony of a free market favors neo-colonialism, which causes vulnerable countries that have been colonized, like Bolivia, to compete in a global market where Western demands seek "authentic" or "exotic" commodities made from the cheapest labor. Competition causes the prices for goods needed to make textiles to rise while the prices of textiles being sold stay stagnant or decline (Stephen 2005, 263). Worst of all, Western textile designers who worked with the cooperatives may begin to make knock-off versions in other parts of the world where labor is cheaper, devastating the original workers (265).

Such competition can influence community members from cooperatives to leave and take clients for themselves. The market's blood thirsty desire to reward the dominant can break the trust and equality that cooperatives are founded on. Sonia's group is struggling to rebound from this very situation. At one point, they were introduced to an American client who was interested in their product. The client

demanded a large export and their president, who spoke English, was handling the transaction. Suddenly, their president betrayed them and stole the client. The president not only took away their largest client and access to a foreign market when doing this, but also she broke the trust within the group. Sonia confessed, "When we knew how to export, we let go of everything we had to do to focus on only this [foreign client]." Sonia spent holidays and late nights awake, crying in frustration, to finish the order. She sacrificed time with her family and invested it in the group only to be betrayed by the principles that she thought they all shared. The group faced three months of low demand and little exportation following this incident, and Sonia became tired of the decline. She questioned if the former president was right to leave the group.

With her arms crossed at her sides, she said, "I have always been afraid of *this*. I always work and work for someone else and the other person excels higher than me." Her confidence in her group has become tested as the demand for their products has lessened, her income has declined, her trust and feelings of equality have been ruined, and her family's survival has suffered. Although united by labor, the egalitarian system can also be broken by the free-market if a mother cannot achieve the basic task of survival. Regardless of the co-op jeopardizing her family's survival, Sonia puts herself first, unlike María and Juana, and refuses to leave the group because of the freedom it grants her. In a similar fashion, one might argue that Sonia's former president put herself first when she stole the clients and risked her "second family's" survival.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to display the resilience of the migrant mothers of Cochabamba who form and fuel the Bolivian economy. These women are unfairly labeled as dirty workers who exploit the system but, in reality, they are the ones being exploited. Mothers have been displaced from their homes, forcing them to migrate to the city and create jobs with the little skills and education they have in a space traditionally ruled by *machismo*. Power politics have oppressed these women on a national and global level, but

through self-employment in the informal sector mothers have found agency to redefine their maternal identities.

In order to understand how these women's maternal identities respond to employment, this article analyzes migrant mothers' relationship to traditional employment, entrepreneurships, and cooperative entrepreneurship in the (in)formal sector. My research shows how job security can change the way women learn to value themselves and how non-profits can provide them with the encouragement and tools that others have always had access to. Through an intersectional lens, it examines how traditional, employed jobs sustain toxic definitions of maternal social roles and how self-employment disrupts them.

As a result, this research rejects the idea that (in)formal jobs provide the best access to agency because mothers from the *campo* cannot engage in self-growth in the same way as middle-class mothers do. Their intersectional identities cause them to engage differently in the world and to have different reasons for what is best. For migrant mothers, self-employment in the informal sector provides them with the support that they were unable to find before. It allows them to transcend gender traditions, regain a sense of value, accomplish maternal goals, and explore their dynamic identities.

This article finds that through entrepreneurship, migrant mothers are able to gain independence from their partners and validation from their community and family, which help them to form positive thoughts of themselves. It also finds that mothers who work alone and for the community continue to put their family's survival first. On one hand, most migrant mothers face obstacles in the form of access to money and resources when they do not know who to trust or contact. On the other hand, by forming knitting cooperative entrepreneurships mothers are able to utilize the framework of motherwork to form "second families", helping them to heal from oppression and to empower each other's self-identity as a collective. Women work with and for the community in these jobs, allowing them to think positively of their maternal identity. Women are able to prioritize themselves, too, as proven by

Sonia and her former president who both made "selfish" choices. Conversely, cooperatives are not perfect in that family survival, empowerment and growth of self-identity can be constantly contested in a neoliberal and patriarchal market.

In short, migrant mothers in the informal sector are transforming economic and social spheres in Bolivia. They not only carry the Bolivian economy on their shoulders, but also they reverse power dynamics, dating back to the start of colonialism, that have tried to exploit their vulnerable identities.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank Professor Joyce Bennett. I would not be the scholar I am today without you. As well, thank you to CISLA and MMUF for making my travel to Bolivia financially and logistically possible. Thank you to Proyecto Trabajo Digno for allowing me to become a part of your team. Thank you to the mothers who educated me and told me their stories. Thank you to my mom, dad, two brothers, and sister-in-law for always cheering me on. Lastly, thank you to the Gurruchaga family for taking me in and giving me a second home.

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