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*Women's Empowerment in the Ghanaian Context: An Examination of
Voice as a Critical Component*

This summer, I spent seven weeks in Cape Coast, Ghana exploring the definition of empowerment at Global Mamas, a local NGO that sells handmade Ghanaian products worldwide with the aim of bringing financial well-being, health, and happiness to female entrepreneurs. Though I was based in Cape Coast, I spent one week traveling to two other Global Mamas offices in Krobo and Ashaiman. Overall, it was incredibly rewarding to incorporate themes from my Gender Studies and International Development course work into meaningful field research.

As I expected, my seven weeks in Ghana were a mix of small daily triumphs and moments that challenged me to listen, to adapt, and to rework my conception of research. I accomplished 40 interviews with women, and men, who engage directly with Global Mamas. I also observed the day-to-day operations of the Global Mamas offices in Cape Coast, Krobo, and Ashaiman, a women's entrepreneurship class put on by Global Mamas, and several meetings at the Global Mamas office in Cape Coast. My early interviews with the leadership team focused on procuring a Global Mamas specific definition of empowerment. When speaking on empowerment at Global Mamas, each member of the Leadership Team mentioned the importance of a woman using her voice. I then incorporated the theme of voice into my interviews with the Mamas (and Papas!) and honed in on how a woman's ability to use her voice can impact her ability to influence her family, her business, and her employer. In my interviews, women spoke of standing up to their employer for better wages, speaking out on community health issues, and defending their work to their husbands. Through my interviews, I was able to

better understand the ways in which a woman's ability to use her voice is a key component to her overall empowerment.

These interviews and observations did not occur without numerous challenges and minor setbacks. The most prominent challenge was the slight language barrier. Though English is the official language of Ghana, more than 250 languages and dialects are spoken in Ghana. In Cape Coast, where I conducted the majority of my interviews, I was unfamiliar with the local language, Fante. The majority of my interviews were conducted entirely in English, which meant the women spoke to me in their second language. Oftentimes, especially early on in my fieldwork, the women answered very simplistically. Even when I probed for more, they seemed unable to fully articulate their answers. I grew frustrated, but noticed a significant improvement in the quality of answers once I reworded a few of the questions and was able to use a member of the Global Mamas staff as a translator.

Another challenge I faced was taking what I learned to be valuable time from the Mamas to interview them. At Global Mamas, time is money. On any give day, the women are busy sewing, batiking, doing quality control, and walking to and from the Global Mamas office to drop off their products. Many times, they were hesitant to talk with me, saying they had little time or they were in a rush. At times, this caused me to rush my interviews, which I quickly realized meant I did not spend time probing and, thus, produced lower quality interviews. This challenge improved when my Ghanaian supervisor, Patience, began to explain to each woman that my interviews would not take a significant amount of time and that they were of meaningful value to Global Mamas.

My research and methodologies varied slightly from my original proposal. My original proposal sought "to explain how [Global Mamas] seeks to empower women in order to

understand the relationship between the way in which “empowerment” is used in Global Mamas’ rhetoric and the way in which it is applied in practice.” In the weeks leading up to my arrival in Cape Coast, I realized my proposal was far too vague. Working with Global Mamas staff via telephone, I worked to further focus my research in way that would both yield productive results and be beneficial to Global Mamas. I realized that, in order to understand empowerment at Global Mamas, I had to define empowerment at Global Mamas. I did this by interviewing various members of the Leadership Team. It was only after I had produced a definition that I could begin interviewing the Mamas and begin to understand empowerment in practice at Global Mamas.

In regard to methodology, I proposed a combination of in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations. I succeeded at interviewing my target number of subjects (40), but ended up doing less of the kind of observations that I proposed. I quickly realized that the “business training sessions, health classes, and computer workshops” I planned to observe were not being offered during my short seven-week stint in Cape Coast. Instead, however, I was surprised at the value of observing the day-to-day routines of the three offices. These observations enabled me to understand the implicit ways in which empowerment is prioritized in the Global Mamas business structure. Looking back on my original proposal, I am pleased with the slight changes I made, as I feel I gathered meaningful and interesting data.

Aside from being the groundwork of my International Development Studies senior capstone, I hope that Global Mamas is able to use my findings to continue empowering women in Ghana. In my final discussion with Patience, she expressed her gratitude for my work and asked my permission to incorporate my questions into their annual report questionnaire. I agreed, and I feel strongly that Global Mamas will be able to measure empowerment in a new way. On a

personal note, I plan to disseminate my research, to share my findings with my peers at Notre Dame and beyond. I hope to present at the annual Human Development Conference and the Midwestern Gender Studies Conference, as well as publish my research in the student run Gender Studies journal, *Through Gendered Lenses*.

In brief, I left Ghana with a real sense of pride in what I accomplished in regard to my research. I have begun to move away from understanding “empowerment” as only a buzzword in international development rhetoric and toward a deep understanding of what it means to be empowered in a specific sociocultural context. I am grateful to the Kellogg Institute for International Studies for providing me with the resources and support to make this project possible.