



## **Ambivalent Resistance**

*Gender, mobility, and Haiti's itinerant market women*

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by

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## 1.0. Introduction

There is a global trend of humanitarian aid and non-governmental organizations working to support gender equality in developing countries. Haiti is no exception. In summary of the wide range of statistics on the legal, economic, and social inequalities women in Haiti face, the United Nations Gender Development Index ranks the country as the worst for equality in the Western Hemisphere (UNDP 2014). On the UN Development Programme's markers of gender development (life expectancy, education, average income per capita), Haiti ties with Rwanda and Uganda for 163<sup>rd</sup> in the world (UNDP 2014). In the initial planning for this paper, my intention was to show that the itinerant market women known as *madan sara* challenge these discourses of gender inequality in Haiti. My preliminary research had shown they were women with agency— independent economic actors and the *poto mitan* (pillars of society or the family) in Haiti (N'Zengou-Tayo 1998). Popular media had caught wind of these market traders and glorified them as “crucial cogs” (Jelly-Schapiro 2015) and “heroines” (Rhodes 2001) of Haiti's domestic economy (See Dupain 2015; The Role of Women Madan Sara in Haitian Economy 2013). Upon further investigation, it became clear that while these women have access to internal and international mobility that provide them agency and power to better their own and their children's life chances, this agency and resistance are not absolute. The *madan saras* are not in full control of the profits from their business and face gender-based violence and discrimination at markets in Haiti and at international borders (Blanc 1998; Hossein 2015; Plotkin 1989). Furthermore, the

lack of access to education, male domination in law-making institutions,<sup>1</sup> the expectations on women to *be the poto mitan* (Stafford 1984: 177-8), incoherent aid programs, and the precarious nature of the work serve as challenges to the power, mobility, and agency of *madan saras*. Therefore I argue in this essay that we must strike a balance between romanticizing women's resistance and the reification of victimhood through discourses of powerlessness.

The outline of this essay is as follows: I will discuss the role of *madan saras* in the informal market economy and who they are; I will lay out the history and context of Haitian migration and its effects on the present; and I will elaborate on the humanitarian and popular discourses of gender inequality in Haiti. Throughout the paper, I will discuss the challenges *madan saras* have had to face locally, internationally, and in relation to humanitarian organizations. Theoretically I draw on Liisa Malkki (1996) and Miriam Ticktin (2011) to understand how these women have been overlooked and silenced through humanitarian discourses and cultural myopia; Mimi Sheller (2004) for her framework of agency and resistance; Ann Stoler (2006) for her concept of imperial formations and humanitarian imperialism; Nancy Fraser's (2005) form of misrepresentation, Mulki Al-Sharmani (2010) to look at the ways women are important in family networks, yet still subject to asymmetrical power relations, and Roy Huijsmans (2012) to consider how the *madan saras* practice agency through engaging in fluid movement and migration.

## **2.0. Madan Sara: The Weaver Bird**

The name *madan sara* is derived from a type of Weaver bird found in Haiti. These migratory birds cover long distances, tittering as they travel and always managing to find food

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<sup>1</sup> In 2015, UN data showed that 4% of seats in Haiti's national parliament were held by women (UNDP 2015). In 2016, Senate President Andris Riché stated in the Miami Herald that no men were elected to the Senate (Charles 2016).

(Blanc 1998). Similarly, the itinerant market traders move from place to place, sharing news, gossip and local produce (Mintz 2010). *Madan saras* are the ‘middlemen’ of the market economy. Researchers distinguish between different types of *saras*, depending on the scale of their operation (e.g. whether they travel domestically, regionally, or internationally), the types of products they import (e.g. local produce versus consumer goods such as French perfume), and the size of their assets (Hossein 2015; Plotkin 1989). The small-scale *saras* purchase fruits and vegetables from local farmers and sell them to vendors in small markets around the island; larger-scale *saras* travel domestically and to the Dominican Republic, selling to wholesalers and regional markets in Port-au-Prince. The most successful *madan saras* have enough capital to pay for goods upfront and travel to other islands as well as the United States. They sell the products they receive to wholesalers and retailers in urban centres (Blanc 1998; Plotkin 1989). This last type of *sara* is the most uncommon as this requires significant amounts of capital and social connections (Hossein 2015; Plotkin 1989).

Transportation is an important consideration for *saras*—many of the small-scale traders travel by foot (in one study, 16 out of the 18 women interviewed travel in this manner [Blanc 1998]) while others use moto-taxis, pick-up trucks, animal-pulled vehicles, or transport vans (Hossein 2015). *Madan saras* need to be able to access remote and underdeveloped areas of Haiti while crossing long distances across the country. Access to diverse types of transportation defines where a *sara* can sell goods but also where they can get them from. Most *saras*, if they have the capital to travel across borders, will travel by bus or boat and often pay bribes at the borders (Hossein 2015; Plotkin 1989); the more successful *saras* have passports that allow them to travel to neighbouring islands. Ownership of a passport is considered a marker of success for a *madan sara* (Plotkin 1989).

The question remains: why are most itinerant market traders women? Clues reside within the patterns of Haitian migration as well as the family organization in Haiti's rural region that makes up the majority of the country. This topic will be elaborated in the following section.

### **3.0. Migration and Family: A History**

The Caribbean emerged through a process of migration and creolization in what could be considered the precursor to today's notion of 'globalization' (Hall 1990; Hannerz 1987; Trouillot 1992). According to Elizabeth Thomas-Hope, migration is an integral part of Caribbean culture (Thomas-Hope 2002: 189). From a macro level view, forced and voluntary migration from Africa and Europe created the foundation for what we know today as the Caribbean. On a micro scale, migration between plantations and between villages of free blacks was common (*ibid.*); after the Revolution in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) when slaves won their freedom from the French, many slaves escaped to the nation of free blacks (Laforest 2000). Intra-Caribbean movement became even more common after the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1834 and the French islands in 1848 (Thomas-Hope 2002:188). Dawn Marshall refers to this post-emancipation migration period (1835 – 1885) as "Interterritorial Migration" when movement occurred within the colonial empires (e.g. Dominicans going to Cuba; Barbadians migrating to Trinidad and Tobago) (Marshall 1982). Two more waves of Caribbean migration occurred after this, with migrations permeating regional borders, followed by the period of "Movement to the Metropoles" (*ibid.*). Through this history migration in the Caribbean developed a positive association—it's seen as a way to bolster social status through education and international work experience. This is even the case when a job is essentially of the same status and undertaken on a nearby Caribbean island (Thomas-Hope 2002: 193).

### **3.1. Haitian Migration**

Haitian immigration shares similar characteristics particularly in the way that people who migrate to other countries are held in high esteem. For Haitians, migration is a strategy to gain better employment opportunities and upward mobility—a view that goes back into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to the Cuban Revolution, Haitians spent long periods working in Cuba (and the Dominican Republic) on sugar plantations (Fjellman and Gladwin 1985: 302). Upon their return, the men and women gained a higher status usually due to their increased economic assets that allowed them to support their families (St. Jacques 2015). In 1920, there were more than 30,000 Haitians working on plantations in the Dominican Republic; by 1937, there were 50,000 (Stepkick 1982). This trend for international migration as a way to increase the likelihood of upward mobility continues today. Michel Laguerre demonstrated that Haitians who migrated to the United States tended to send remittances to family remaining in Haiti. The changes in economic status for families as well as upgrades to rural villages spurred more emigration (Laguerre 1998: 28-29).

### **3.2. Gender Dynamics in Migration and Family Patterns**

In the capital of Haiti, there are 130 women to every 100 men. This gender imbalance is a reflection of Haitian migration patterns, with male emigration being far more common (Blanc 1998). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, men were the preferred emigrants when it came to labour migration as they were typically employed as agricultural hands in sugar cane fields in Cuba and the Dominican Republic (Stepkick 1982). For over a century, Haiti relied on male labour migration to nearby countries for economic growth; working on plantations abroad was seen as a rite of passage for men (Schwartz 2015). Sarah Gammage also argued that more men tend to attempt undocumented entry to the United States owing to the physical risks involved in sea

crossings and the expectation on women to look after the home (Gammage 2004: 752). Due to the traditional absence of men, 70 percent of the *de facto* heads of household in Haiti are women (Blanc 1998: 190) and they took a prominent role in public society in order to support their families before technology made travel and sending remittances easier and faster. However, the reason the majority of itinerant market traders are women is not only owed to migration patterns; it is also important to understand the organization of rural families. The most common type of arrangement for rural Haitian families is the *plasaj*. It is the most “respectable” and “committed” type of union after marriage (Blanc 1998; St. Jacques 2015). In these relationships, men are expected to provide women with a house, land to farm, and livestock in exchange for her labour (in the home and outside of it) and the children they produce (St. Jacques 2015: 217); men are expected to cultivate land and provide food for the family when home and able (Murray 1977); and men are customarily responsible for paying children’s school fees (Blanc 1998: 197) (though this is not always the case, see below). The majority female domination in the *madan sara* role and its importance to the functioning of the subsistence economy is a result of both men’s obligation to support the family (typically through the valued act of working abroad); the family dynamics that provide women the ability to cultivate land and start building capital and fund the start-up costs of being a *sara*; and because men’s education both affords them opportunities for formal employment, and dissuades them from doing menial jobs (Blanc 1998).

#### **4.0. Mobility and Resistance**

Women are not always hindered from international mobility due to preference for male labour. As St. Jacques argues, the emphasis on labour migration has resulted in Haitian migration being framed as a particularly male enterprise (St. Jacques 2015: 207). Yet, women are very



involved in the decision-making process and utilize this mobility to bolster their social status and that of their families. Similar to Al-Sharmani's (2010) findings on women in the Somali diaspora, however, the contemporary attitude towards migration shows a preference for Haitian women to migrate. Haitian migration to the United States has been considered 'chain migration' (Stafford 1984) or similar to the structure of a multinational corporation (Laguerre 1998). One or two family members will be funded by the family to start a "subsidiary" household in the United States; they are expected to send remittances and support family and friends who wish to immigrate to the United States thereafter (*ibid.*). Women are considered the first choice out of the family for migration because they are seen as less likely to leave their families behind and more likely to find employment as domestic workers (Stafford 1984: 176). While women are given the opportunity for advancement through mobility, the expectation for sending remittances and supporting family members can cause undue financial hardship and psychological stress (Al-Sharmani 2010; Laguerre 1998). This supports my argument as it relates to the paradoxes of gender equality through mobility: women are able to be mobile and gain upward mobility through that migration, but the expectations on them as women (particularly that they will be the *poto mitan*) in fact undermine their agency and self-determination.

#### **4.1. Mobility: Risk and Resistance**

In the case of *madan saras*, the ability to move in the physical sense is a predictor of their ability to move in the social and economic sense because where they can travel to is correlated with the success of their business. In a report prepared for the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Plotkin (1989) found that the more successful the *madan saras* were, the more countries they travelled to. To start, *saras* work within Haiti (unless they have built up capital through other means, such as remittances or their husbands'

work), eventually scaling up and travelling to the Dominican Republic and working with wholesale markets. Some *saras* are able to start travelling to other countries such as Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Martinique, and eventually the United States (*ibid.*). A passport is seen as a status symbol in Haiti; it means hope for a better life for oneself and one's children (*ibid.*). In many cases, women become *saras* in order to get the required international travel stamps that will allow them to apply for an American visa. As Plotkin (1989) writes, "a prime motivation for most Madam Sara to travel is the desire to improve the life chances and social status of her children via education abroad" (*ibid.*). This (constrained) freedom of internal and international migration for *madan saras* seems liberating and a challenge to the discourses of gender inequality in Haiti; however, it is Janus-faced. While they are able to use mobility to increase their life chances, the women also come up against very serious challenges and difficulties in their role as *madan saras*. *Saras* face gender-based violence (Hossein 2015), they are often not in control of the income they earn (Hossein 2015: 43; Plotkin 1989), and the work is precarious for a number of structural reasons to be outlined below (Plotkin 1989).

Gender-based violence while on the job is a very real probability for all *madan saras*. According to Hossein's (2015: 45) research, the *saras* she interviewed had been physically or verbally harassed and assaulted during interactions with clients and customers as well as on the road. While they are travelling within Haiti and across borders to the Dominican Republic, women consistently reported being extorted for money (Hossein 2015; Plotkin 1989)—and at increasing rates due to the political climate between the two countries (Jelly-Schapiro 2015). Furthermore, and most disturbingly, women expect to be raped during their travels and at the markets where they work (*ibid.*). While gender-based violence is a longstanding problem in Haiti (USAID 2016), *madan saras* are particularly vulnerable. As mentioned above, the majority of

*saras* travel by foot, often long distances in rural areas of the country. They travel early in the morning and late at night. According to the USAID, the risk of gender-based violence against women in Haiti is exacerbated by “poverty, poor security, and lack of awareness.” Furthermore, Senate President Andris Riché was quoted in the *Miami Herald* saying, “Despite all the years of existence of our nation, we are incapable of electing women in Senate. We will be 30 guys deciding on the future of this country, while 53 percent of the population are women and they assume all of the economic responsibilities” (J. Charles 2016). Men are aware that they can commit these crimes with impunity because the *saras* are unlikely to report them and often times the men committing the crimes are authorities who should be protecting them (Hossein 2015).

#### **4.2. Humanitarian Misapprehension**

In working to promote Haiti’s long-term economic and democratic development, the United States government is prioritizing reducing gender-based violence as well as “empowering women” (USAID 2016). I am particularly skeptical of this program for reasons I will discuss further. The United States has a tumultuous history in Haiti, including an occupation and the ousting of a democratically elected President. This makes the USAID’s orientation towards women’s empowerment seem highly problematic and suspect. As Ann Stoler (2006:134) explains, imperialism is no longer a top-down, coercive practice; it is insidious often exercised through humanitarian sympathy that requires “inequalities of position and possibility”—core features of early colonial empires. The USAID project also assumes that there is not action on the part of Haitian women. In reality, Haitian feminism emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (C. Charles 1995) and locally based groups have been organizing around this issue themselves (Fuller 1999). In failing to consider how to collaborate with women on the ground in Haiti, the theory of neo-imperialism is further supported.

Humanitarian organizations tend to misunderstand the gender dynamics that are at play in Haitian society (Schwartz 2015). For example, women are considered the pillars of society (N'Zengou-Tayo 1998) yet foreign NGOs and scholars tend to construct Haitian society as patriarchal. They impose gender models that are illogical in the Haitian context and misunderstanding the context, nuance, and historicities of Haitian family dynamics (Schwartz 2015). Women, particularly in rural Haiti, *are* empowered, especially when compared to their urban counterparts (Schwartz 2015). In the article for the *New Yorker*, the journalist does not report (and perhaps was not told) about the gender-based violence that they experience as market traders. Hossein (2015) also found that the market women were unlikely to discuss the rapes and sexual assaults they experienced with anyone. Silence, or the refusal to speak is not a lack of empowerment; it can also be considered a form of passive resistance. The women in Hossein's (2015) study preferred to wear female condoms to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections and diseases because the likelihood of rape was high. The refusal to report assaults on the part of *madan saras* and the low representation of women in Parliament and the Senate, demonstrates that gender inequality and gender-based violence in Haiti is a structural problem—not one that can be solved through “mass media campaigns” and an “innovative emergency response approach to GBV” (USAID 2016).

### **4.3. The Myth of the Male Breadwinner**

In many cases, women are not in control of the income they earn from their work as a *sara*. As discussed above, men have a right to the income derived from women's labour when they are in a *plasaj* relationship. In contrast, a study through EMMUS found that 53 percent of women decide what to do with the money they earn and a further 43 percent make the decision together with their partner (MSPP 2012). While male companions in these *plasaj* relationships

have economic responsibilities to the family, there is a high rate of unemployment among men. In Plotkin's study, all of the women she interviewed were responsible for paying their children's school fees; only one woman had a husband who paid all of the rent (Plotkin 1989: 18). In another paper, women pitied men because they were better educated and could not accept work they considered demeaning (Blanc 1998: 197). As a result, men rarely participate in agricultural trading economies, leaving women have more access to this type of work thanks to the small investment and amount of education necessary (Hossein 2015). However, the lack of access to education for women this often leaves *madan saras* dependent on men to perform accounting and bookkeeping tasks. Though men may have access to the income *saras* make, the women enact forms of resistance in a number of ways. Some research participants refuse to answer questions about their assets (Blanc 1998) while others avoid formal bookkeeping altogether (Hossein 2015). Despite their lack of formal education, *madan saras* are adept at performing math and retaining accurate figures about transactions with clients and customers (Plotkin 1989). While humanitarian aid organizations decry gender inequalities in education, they overlook the ways that women have managed to conduct themselves in business interactions without it. This echoes Mimi Sheller's (2004) argument that we should look at positive forms of agency. Rather than focusing on what women are doing to undermine the state, it is more productive and instructive to consider how women are thriving in the face of those challenges. Learning more about that gives us more ways of understanding how disenfranchised groups can claim justice for themselves, while opening our eyes to other forms of ontological security and resistance.

While women's mobility gives high hopes for the recognition of resistance to patriarchal gender systems, there are many facets of this mobility that demonstrate that resistance also comes with a price. *Madan saras* face gender-based violence while on the move and the earnings

from their work are not always their own. Within these issues related to women's mobility, there are pockets of resistance such as taking back some of their agency through the use of prophylactics as well as refusing to report all of their earnings to their partners (and the government, see Section 5.1.). In conclusion, this section supports the multi-faceted nature of women's mobility and economic independence as being a marker of resistance to—and progress towards dismantling—structural inequities.

### **5.0. Tell Me How You Really Feel: Humanitarian Discourses**

Humanitarian aid organizations and NGOs have taken on the mission of bringing gender equity to the masses of underdeveloped countries around the world (*See* CIDA 2003 and USAID 2016). In determining that Haiti is a country in need of gender reform, these organizations cite a number of different sources and statistics. According to the United Nations Development Fund for Women, discriminatory legal codes prevent women from receiving equal wages and result in harsher penalties for 'crimes' such as adultery and divorce (UNIFEM 2004). World Bank data cites that 70 percent of all women in Haiti have experienced some form of violence with the sexual abuse of girls being a widespread issue (World Bank 2002: viii). In 2016, the USAID concluded that gender-based violence and discrimination against women and girls were a result of political instability, poverty, and crime. Furthermore, girls were less likely to complete their education (USAID 2016). Women in Haiti are also more likely to die while giving birth—Haiti has the highest mother mortality rates in the Western Hemisphere (World Bank 2002) and offers poor antenatal care (N'Zengou-Tayo 1998). Overall, social scientists have portrayed Haitian culture as strongly patriarchal and male-centered with the corollary conclusion that it is a repressive place for women. In Western society, we have constructed statistical data to hold the

most esteemed place in regimes of truth and epistemology. We value the empirical and statistical data, with large sample sizes are difficult to refute. While this paper has no intention to refuting or undermining the very real gender inequalities and challenges that Haitian women face, it asks for a nuanced, ground-level look at the context in which the inequalities were formed as well as how women are challenging and working within them. Western models of patriarchy that don't fit have been forcibly superimposed onto Haitian understandings of gender relations, obfuscating the realities of Haitian communities. As discussed above, men typically emigrate for economic reasons and leave women to be the head of the household. It could also be argued that families generally do not show a preference for educating boys over girls—in fact Haitian girls have higher secondary school attendance rates than boys (UNICEF 2013). The point here is to illustrate that statistics can be selectively referenced to support a particular argument or to obscure others. Humanitarian intervention and discourses are highly politicized and corporatized. A lot of the statistics cited give the impression that Haitian women have little agency, are under the control of their spouses, and victims of Haiti's "backwards" gender and legislative system. This section of the paper will argue that aid organizations perpetuate a 'helpless victim' narrative and misses out on the different ways that Haitian exercise agency and autonomy.

### **5.1. Casual Blindness**

According to the World Bank, Haitian women make up 47.5 percent of the total labour force (World Bank 2015). However, it has been established that women constitute 75 percent of the informal sector (Gardella 2006; UNIFEM 2004) and 84 percent of petty commercial trade (UNIFEM 2004). From this statistic alone, it can be concluded that this data understates Haitian women's involvement in the labour market. Without *madan saras*, market trade would be

difficult to conduct as they are able to access remote areas of Haiti that cannot be reached by other means of transport. As Etant Dupain (2015) writes:

There is no aspect of the economy where women are not at the base. If the Madan Sara does not go to work, the city does not eat. If the Madan Sara does not go up into the mountains and back down into the slums, the market will not function. Without the Madan Sara, there is no market, and without the market there is no economy, and without the economy there is no country.

Marie Yanick Mezile, the Haitian Minister of Women's Affairs, called *madan saras* the *poto mitan* Haiti: "She is the pillar of Haitian society, the pillar of the Haitian economy. She is the *poto mitan* of Haiti. It is a sector that has been neglected" (Borns 2012). It is clear that these women are integral to Haiti's domestic economy, yet the Minister of Women's Affairs in Haiti admits that it is difficult to help them. Humanitarian projects, on the other hand, applaud the programs they are working on for women in the agricultural sector and the success of micro financing institutions as progress (Rhodes 2001; USAID 2016a). The USAID Feed the Future Haiti program reports having trained 3500 female farmers and certified 900 female master farmers. Half of the 26,000 farmers participating in the Haiti Hope mango program are women (USAID 2016a). The marketing literature for these programs state that they are contributing the catalyzing of growth of women-owned businesses in Haiti. Yet it begs the question: is this really what women in Haiti *need*? Many would argue that it is not—many of the humanitarian organizations are enforcing their own ideals of development and ideas of "good" Haitian society. When many of these organizations subsist on donations from private donors, it's necessary to create (and sensationalize) a problem that needs to be solved.



On the other hand, Mezile is quoted as saying that “If we cannot identify them [*madan saras*], we cannot do anything. We cannot even provide education to help them improve” (Borns 2012). She argues that the issue stems from *madan saras* not wanting to be identified through official means. This insight reveals that women are *choosing* to work within the informal market sector (though circumstances discussed above may necessitate it). There are opportunities for women to make their role formal through documentation and training, but many choose not to use them. Mimi Sheller (2004) discusses resistance as the ability to work within *and* against the system; upholding it while undermining it. In this instance, this is exactly what *madan saras* are doing. They do not want to be identified by the state (unsurprising given its history of corruption and instability) and are using their own means to fund and grow their business. While exclusion from upward mobility in society is a major motivating women to become *saras* (Hossein 2015), they also use this exclusion to their advantage. Just as they refuse to report their assets and income to male companions, they resist state control through refusing to be identified as a market trader. This is not necessarily situation where women need to be ‘saved’. There are Haitian microfinance organizations that provide women with start-up funding for marketing businesses. The role is a one that is passed down through generational knowledge. Organizations need to work to find a place where they can really be of use rather than running programs that looks attractive to donors.

## **5.2. Compassion That Can Heal**

Humanitarian organizations are missing a major part of the problem that *saras* are facing. While there are improvements being made, these organizations are not reaching many of the women they purport to help. Another issue with humanitarian intervention in *madan saras*’ affairs is that they are not consulted when these programs are put into place. During the UN

International Donor's conference in March 2010 put on to raise money for Haiti's reconstruction after the devastating earthquake, women's groups were excluded (Padgett and Warnecke 2011). Women in Haiti are often not consulted or able to actively participate in the reconstruction or development of their own country. In other words, women lack representation and therefore are unable to access justice in their communities (Fraser 2005). At the national level, there is little recourse or even consideration of women's issues due to their lack of representation in legislative institutions.

For example, research has found that their limited language skills and knowledge of customs abroad due to inadequate access to education makes them vulnerable to ridicule (Plotkin 1989). Resources could be added to provide market women with language courses to help facilitate their business transactions abroad. Another, more serious, issue facing market women is safety. One way to combat that is through access to networks of communication and support among itinerant market women. Many *madan saras* travel with other women on the road (though this is not always effective against sexual assaults [Hossein 2015]) or combine resources to travel to the Dominican Republic to buy larger quantities of goods (Plotkin 1989). While aid organizations have been creating solutions for women who ostensibly lack employment, grassroots organizations see where connections between *madan saras* is incredibly important. Women's P2P Network is also critical of these organizations. On their website they write that "Technology solutions have been developed by outsiders, without local women included, creating a loss of leverage for citizen participation and development in Haiti" (Women's P2P Network n.d.). Women do not need help building their businesses—they have "generations of accumulated knowledge" to draw on (Hossein 2015: 42). Mobile phones are important in the process of border crossings (Horst and Taylor 2014) and yet women are unable to access

technology that could help them avoid or get justice for gender-based violence due to unavailability and illiteracy. The creation or support of a network of market women through the use of technology is notably absent from the USAID's plan to improve gender equity in Haiti. Better use of resources could be providing access to mobile phones, training women on how to use them, and creating mobile applications that will connect *madan saras* together or give them direct access to safety helplines—the Uber for *madan saras* in Haiti. While the humanitarian projects are well-meaning, it is clear that they often do more harm than good and hinder women from economic independence (*see* Malkki 1996; Ticktin 2011).

## **6.0. Conclusion**

Humanitarian aid organizations and NGO statistics construct Haiti as a place that is unliveable for the majority of Haitian women. They construct a victim narrative, creating the same distancing affect of sympathy that forms the core of a downward gaze towards 'underdeveloped' countries (Stoler 2006). The humanitarian mission shares many commonalities with the civilizing missions of empires past. The aim of this paper was not to undermine the statistics or stories of gender inequality, but rather to give a more rounded view to the ways that women exist and resist. Often, mobility is seen as a privilege or a resistance to larger power structures such as patriarchy or the bounded nation-state. However, this paper has argued that neither resistance nor compliance is absolute. I take Mimi Sheller's orientation towards justice: rather than looking solely at how women are resisting structural inequities, it is important to look at the positive forces of agency (Sheller 2004). Lack of representation in the political sphere and their work in the informal economy means that Haitian women and the issues they face are invisible in the social and economic sectors. Regardless, Haiti's *madan saras* are defying and

undermining gendered and societal power relationships while holding up the very structures that have marginalized them—the Haitian state and economy. Violence and lack of opportunities does not automatically mean a lack of agency. Using internal and international mobility, *madan saras* provide for their families and give them opportunities to attend school domestically and abroad. The *saras* face gender-based violence on the job but refuse to let it dictate their role in society, taking back some of their agency through compliant resistance. *Saras* also refute the myth of the male breadwinner in the Haitian household—movement does not have to be international to be lucrative. While *madan saras* are resourceful, mobile businesswomen, this role should not be romanticized. It is an adaptation to difficult, structural circumstances. But challenges should not automatically denote an inability to resist, act, or gain self-sufficiency.

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