

The Exclusion of Afro-Guyanese Hucksters in Micro-Banking

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Abstract:

At the 1997 Microcredit Summit in Washington DC, the primary goal of microfinance agreed to was that it was a tool to upset conventional banking and to make financial services inclusive; yet this is not the case for microfinance in Guyana. Educated Indo-Guyanese lenders admitted to their own personal biases against Afro-Guyanese as clients without remorse in this case study of 93 people. I argue in this paper that micro-banking managers and staff hold onto historically-rooted prejudices which interfere with the allocation of loans. Race is seemingly *the* issue that divides the populace; however, I found issues of racial, class and gender bias intertwined in the lending process that deny poor Afro-Guyanese women loans. Personal bias can affect the management of economic development programmes for the poor and it should not be assumed that microfinance helps everyone. *Keywords:* microfinance, exclusion, racism, class, gender, Guyana, inequality, politics, discrimination.

Resumen: La exclusión de los ‘hucksters’ afroguyaneses en la microbanca

En la Cumbre de Microcrédito celebrada en Washington DC en 1997, se acordó que el objetivo principal de las microfinanzas era servir como herramienta para desbaratar la banca convencional y hacer inclusivos los servicios financieros; sin embargo, éste no es el caso de las microfinanzas en Guyana. Prestamistas indoguyanese con una buena formación se dejaron llevar sin reparos por sus propios prejuicios personales contra los afroguyaneses como clientes en este estudio de caso de 93 personas. En este documento sostengo que los directores y el personal de la microbanca se aferran a prejuicios enraizados históricamente que interfieren en la concesión de préstamos. Aparentemente la raza es la cuestión que divide al pueblo; sin embargo, identifiqué prejuicios raciales, de clase y de género entrelazados en el proceso crediticio por los que se deniegan préstamos a mujeres afroguyanesas pobres. Los prejuicios personales pueden afectar a la gestión de los programas de desarrollo económico para los pobres y no se debe asumir que las microfinanzas ayudan a todo el mundo. *Palabras clave:* microfinanzas, exclusión, racismo, clase, género, Guyana, desigualdad, política, discriminación.

Introduction

Micro-credit is a favoured topic at global events on poverty reduction at the U.N. and the World Bank.¹ The Micro-credit Campaign Summit declared in 1997 that in the future microfinance would reach 100 million poor families, and it has surpassed that goal.² Eight years later, the U.N. marked 2005 as the International Year of Microcredit in recognition of the salient role in reaching millions of poor entrepreneurs (Dichter and Harper 2007, 5). Awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Mohammed Yunus and the Grameen Bank in 2006 confirmed the idea that poor people, especially women, are good investment risks (that is, they repay loans) and that micro-banking can contribute to reducing poverty around the world. The microfinance industry has earned its reputation as one that is inclusive of people marginalized in a society. Today more than 205 million excluded people have access to micro loans (Reed 2012).

Prior to the 1980s poor people in the informal sector were limited in their options to borrow money: they obtained loans from friends, family, local moneylenders, or government agencies (Sengupta and Aubuchon 2008, 17; Rutherford 2000, 32). Few had access to credit unions because these organizations focused on salaried workers. Many people also relied on informal banks (rotating savings and credit associations [ROSCAs]) (Ardener and Burman 1996). By the 1980s, southern non-government organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh, such as the Grameen Bank and BRAC, proposed micro-credit as a way to counteract exclusionary forms of formal finance and to diminish the exploitative grasp of moneylenders on the poor (Roy 2010). The goal of micro-credit for these leaders in developing countries was to re-create conventional banking systems with a system that prioritized 'access to finance' for marginalized entrepreneurs (Roodman 2012; Micro-credit Summit Campaign website 2008; Counts 2006).

This article asks the question: Is micro-banking as inclusive to poor entrepreneurs as it purports itself to be? I argue in this paper that microfinance managers and staff who live in stratified societies such as Guyana are still holding on to historically-rooted prejudices which interfere with the allocation of loans. Personal bias can affect the management of economic development programmes for the poor and it should not be assumed that microfinance helps everyone. Hebe Verrest's work (2013) in Trinidad and Surinam also found that business development programmes do not reach micro-entrepreneurs because of an elite bias. My argument is that the personal bias of local managers and staff can limit access to microfinance to eligible entrepreneurs. The empirical work in Albouystown (a slum of Georgetown) suggests that race, class and gender prejudices are pervasive in the society,

and influence the managers and their staff in the main microfinance institutions. This issue of identity politics affecting microfinance allocations is not mentioned in the literature – such as Roodman’s *Due Diligence* (2012) or Bateman’s *Confronting Microfinance* (2011). In fact, the microfinance industry as a whole does not scrutinize the people who allocate money. I argue that Afro-Guyanese are excluded from accessing micro-credit by analysing the politicized context rooted in class, racial and gender bias. I then explore the negative statements used by micro-bankers that denigrate the Afro-Guyanese, thus affecting the lending processes.

In Guyana, managers and their staff in microfinance programmes freely admitted to their lending bias against Blacks. My findings show that micro lenders (most of whom are Indo-Guyanese) discriminate against Afro-Guyanese hucksters (informal traders and vendors), thus creating economic exclusion. Race is seemingly *the* issue that divides the populace; furthermore, I found issues of racial, class and gender bias intertwined in the lending process. Race upsets the lending process in Guyana, but loan officers (a class dimension) often deny Afro-Guyanese women loans (as race and gender bias are intertwined). The largest lender in the country has an outreach to only 22 per cent female clients, which clearly suggests that this process adversely affects women.³ This interplay of identities in the Guyanese context makes intersectionality relevant as a form of analysis.

Caribbean scholar Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (1995) makes the important point that it is required to use an African lens in the Caribbean to understand the inequality directed against people of African ancestry. My work is grounded in intersectionality theorizing, which offers an alternative framework to understanding exclusion in certain contexts (Crenshaw 1991). It is the interacting identity bias of race, class and gender that prevents Afro-Guyanese, mostly females, from equal opportunity in obtaining micro loans. This study focuses on the people who make loans and those who receive them. Haitian-American scholar Gina Ulysse (2007) also uses intersectionality to understand the conditions of Jamaican *higglers* (traders).

Methods

This project had a sample size of 93 interviews, of which 29 were hucksters, conducted in November 2008, and from April to May 2010, with some follow up in 2011.⁴ Albouystown in Georgetown was selected for this study because it is a microcosm of Guyana’s multi-cultural society (Bureau of Statistics 2002). It is a culturally diverse slum of 4,883 population with a large Afro-Guyanese *dougl*a population,⁵ as well as Indo-Guyanese, Portuguese-Guyanese, and Amerindians. The hucksters, mostly female (66 per

cent) were drawn from here. The nine single mothers I interviewed who were the heads of their households said they had no access to social services and had to sell goods in the ‘Big Market’ of Stabroek, in Pennington (La Penitence) or to the Indo-Guyanese who own wholesale shops on Regent Street. Findings for this article are also based on a variety of qualitative sources: 1) secondary materials, including local newspapers, *Kaieteur News* and *Stabroek News*; 2) interviews, both semi-structured and in-depth, of lenders, borrowers, and other actors; 3) focus groups; 4) surveys; 5) textual analysis of reports and internal documents; and 6) participant observation. I organized one focus group of six hucksters and the remaining 29 participated in in-depth structured interviews. I interviewed 11 microfinance bankers and 14 regional microfinance experts as well as 39 individuals from civil society, government, NGOs, churches, universities and the private sector.

Microfinance in the English-speaking Caribbean

The idea of small business is an old one in the Caribbean region⁶ where African slaves carried out market activities and engaged in informal banking (Mintz 1955; Witter 1989; Wong 1996; St. Pierre 1999). Women also organized local banks to help excluded individuals access banking services, such as Partner and Box hand (Ardener and Burman 1996; St. Pierre 1999; Hossein 2013). Faye V. Harrison’s work (1988) showed that since slave times Jamaican higglers have struggled to make a livelihood in precarious economic and political environments (Ulysse 2007, 83). Haitian women have earned the title of *poto mitan* (‘pillars of the family’ in Haitian Kreyol) because of their hard work (N’Zengou-Tayo 1998, 118; *Poto Mitan* film 2008). The regular Penny Bank opened in Dominica in 1949, which catered to the entrepreneurial poor (Lashley 2006).

In many parts of the Caribbean region, micro-credit is an important poverty reduction tool for many lenders (ECLAC 2000; Lashley 2004a; 2004b; CDB 2010). In March 2012, the Inter-American Development Bank’s (IDB) second phase of the Caribbean Capacity II project recognized the limited reach of micro lending programmes, as well as the failure of managers to adhere to technical best practices. Despite the investment in microfinance to support small business persons, the microfinance sector in the Caribbean region, particularly in the English-speaking arena, has not been as successful as in other regions. In regards to the English-speaking Caribbean, Chalmers and Wenner (2001) suggest that a relatively high standard of living and access to remittances and an highly educated labour force all work to create an aversion to self-employment.

There is little consensus on why Caribbean micro lending (with the exception of the Dominican Republic) has not fared well compared to micro-lending elsewhere (Chalmers and Wenner 2001; Lashley 2004a, b; Daley-Harris 2006; Westley 2005). Scholarly reviews of microfinance, particularly of the Caribbean region, do not however explore the role of cultural factors in microfinance allocations. At the time this field work was conducted in 2010, Guyanese micro lenders reached only 10 per cent of those clients who needed microfinance (Author's fieldwork in 2010; Navajas and Tejerina 2006).

Guyana's political history

Guyana is one of the poorest countries in the region, and it identifies itself culturally as part of the Caribbean. It is also a relatively small country with a great diversity among its population of 756,000 (World Bank 2011), composed of six recognized races: East Indians, Africans, Europeans, Amerindians (indigenous peoples), Chinese, and mixed-race; as well as three main religions: Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam (Hope 1985, 13; Smith 1964, 117). The National Census (2002, 2) found that the largest ethnic groups were Indo-Guyanese at 43.5 per cent and Afro-Guyanese at 30.2 per cent, with those of mixed-race (*dougl*a and others) at 16.7 per cent, Amerindians at 9.2 per cent, and whites and Chinese less than 1 per cent.

At independence from the United Kingdom in 1966, two leaders had emerged: Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham, and Cheddi Jagan, who had forged an alliance to oust British colonial control. Cheddi Jagan, heralded as father of independence, came from a humble Indo-Guyanese social background (Ramharack 2005). Together they created the People's Progressive Party (PPP). Starting in 1954, Jagan assisted in the development of rice and sugar farming in Black Bush Polder and West Ruimveldt as a way to drum up political support from the Indo-Guyanese. In the 1960s, Cheddi Jagan diverted resource benefits such as housing, loans, and employment to rural Indo-Guyanese communities (Scott 2007, 40; Greenidge 2001). Jagan called on Indo-Guyanese to *apanjaat*, a Hindi word for 'vote for your own kind' (Nettles 2007, 63; St. Pierre 1999, 138).

Jagan and Burnham had developed race-based political parties, in which Indo-Guyanese rallied around Jagan, while Afro-Guyanese supported Burnham (Gibson 2005, 8; Dupuy 1996). Guyanese scholars (e.g. Kisson 2010; Gibson 2006; Trotz 2004; St. Pierre 1999; Hintzen 1989; Thomas 1988; Kemp 1985; Rodney 1981; Daly 1974) document the use of race by both Burnham and Jagan to control people.⁷ In 1955, the power-sharing arrangement broke-down and Burnham created the People's National Con-

gress (PNC) (Gibson 2006, 372; Trotz 2004, 2; Smith 1964, 179). Racial tensions began when people rioted against new taxes brought in by the PPP (Hope 1985, 50). By 1964, rape of women and racial violence ensued and ‘Black Friday’ was the start of the race riots that has shaped the country’s modern politics and race relations (Trotz 2004, 5-7).

Burnham’s authoritarian regime ruled for two decades and was characterized by socialist rhetoric and clientelism that favoured Afro-Guyanese over the Indo-Guyanese population (Dupuy 1996). Guyanese scholar Greenidge (1981) argued that Burnham’s state power reached so far into people’s everyday lives that fear was rampant. The state controlled the private sector and community development. In order to cripple the opposition, Burnham banned imported staples important to the Indo-Guyanese diet, such as flour, split peas, and potatoes (Mars 1995, 180). However, his interference in the market for political control harmed not only Indo-Guyanese owned businesses engaged in imports, but also negatively affected the small-scale Afro-Guyanese vendors who supported him (*Kaeiteur News* 11 December 2011; Field interviews in 2010). Policies to humiliate Indo-Guyanese led to the emigration of the Indo-Guyanese business class and professionals (Greenidge 1981). Burnham’s corruption accelerated an economic crisis in the early 1980s, and poor Afro-Guyanese turned to huckstering (trading) as a means of survival and as a way to resist the political handouts of an oppressive regime.

One of the best-known critics of the Burnham regime was Walter Rodney, an Afro-Guyanese intellectual who formed the leftist Working People’s Alliance (WPA). Rodney (1996, 60) claimed that the Burnham regime employed the ‘divide and conquer strategy’ that white colonizers used to control African slaves and East Indian indentured servants. Walter Rodney argued for an alliance between the poorer classes of the two races which threatened the political elites because they knew their power, based on race, would be lost if voters united along class lines. The killing of activist Walter Rodney in 1980 frustrated this initiative.

The political ascendancy of Indo-Guyanese of the PPP in 1992 and its ruling for more than twenty years led to the systemic discrimination against Afro-Guyanese in terms of access to social and financial services (Scott 2007, 69; Gibson 2005, 8; *In the Sky’s Wild Noise* film 1983).⁸ Williams, Cummings, and Marshall (2007, 106) find that Afro-Guyanese were systematically left out of economic programmes. In fact, PPP governments have turned down development projects when funds did not go to the Indo-Guyanese (or to the Amerindians), the government’s two political support bases.⁹ An example of race-based patronage was the government’s rejec-

tion of a European Union-funded enterprise project for Black youth in depressed urban areas (community activist interview, 30 April 2010; Micro-finance expert consultant interview, 3 May 2010). Jagdeo's regime (1999-2011) allegedly had links to the narcotics trade, extra-judicial killings, and grave human rights abuses such as death squads killing Afro-Guyanese (Amnesty Report 2010). Community activists and leaders noted that political elites are the ones to disseminate a narrative to praise certain Indo-Guyanese (not those in the urban slum areas) for their hard work and self-sacrifice and to belittle Afro-Guyanese as a way to keep the groups divided (community activist interview, 7 May 2010; UN expert interview, 4 May 2010; Community leader interview, 3 May 2010; Gibson 2006, 376).¹⁰

The origins of micro-banking in Guyana

Historically, banks such as the Colonial Bank (later changed to Barclays, UK) and the British Guiana Bank (BGB) catered to English planters and later to the 'whitened' indentured labourers, such as the Portuguese and Chinese, who became merchants. However, these banks refused to lend to the black and brown populations (Rodney 1981, 33; Daly 1974, 166; Smith 1964, 78). Afro-Guyanese were denied loans under the colonial administration and they relied on informal banks such as Box hand (Hossein 2013). On the plantations, slaves had begun cooperative-like banking activities, drawing on traditions they brought with them from Africa (St. Pierre 1999, 69). These African collective banking systems, called 'Susus,' have a long tradition and slaves used them to support trade amongst themselves. Today, Afro-Guyanese and poor Indo-Guyanese continue to participate in informal systems derived from Susus – Box hand and Penny Bank systems (Hossein 2013).

In 1828, the first bank to assist slaves, Port Office Savings Bank, was set up in Georgetown (Daly 1974, 166), but it could not meet the demand. By 1833, freed slaves, no longer forced to live on the plantations, continued to pool their earnings from agricultural sales and wages because access to finance was difficult. With no state services, former slaves organized cooperatives, and it was through these that the Negro 'village movement' grew. In 1914, freed slaves formed 'Task Gangs' to organize into cooperatives to meet their livelihood needs, such as 'Up and On Clubs', 'Buying Clubs', and 'Saving Unions'. Buxton is an example of a people coming together collectively to buy land (Greenidge 2001, 17; Daly 1974, 141; Smith 1964, 40).

In 1954, the British set up a legal framework for the British Guiana Credit Cooperatives to provide micro and small loans to the poor (Smith 1964, 78-81). At independence, banking was a contentious issue because

while the whitened business elites had access to finance, the majority of citizens, Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese, did not (Smith 1964). President Forbes Burnham nationalized the banks, because he understood that banks excluded poor people, particularly Afro-Guyanese, from access to loans. Guyanese historian Maurice St. Pierre (1999, 69-70) reports that informal banks and cooperatives became the only alternative for Blacks, who had been denied financial services under colonial rule.

Burnham invested in cooperatives because they fitted with his socialist political agenda, and he felt that the collective nature of cooperatives resonated with Afro-Guyanese culture especially following the aftermath of slavery. Burnham defined cooperatives as entities ‘to make the small man a real man’. In his *Declaration of Sophia* he noted that cooperatives were the vehicle for economic empowerment (Barrow-Giles 2002, 210). In the 1970s, Burnham created the Guyana National Cooperative Bank (GNCB), the country’s first locally-owned bank, and later set up other state-owned banks, such as the Guyana Cooperative Agricultural and Industrial Bank (GAIBANK) and the Guyana Bank for Trade and Industry (GBTI) to reach the poor and Afro-Guyanese engaged in low level agricultural production and trade (Sookdeo 1997). Both the Guyana National Cooperative Bank and GAIBANK are believed to be the first micro lenders.

During the 1980s and 1990s GAIBANK was a lender to poor entrepreneurs (Sookdeo 1997). However, these institutions were mainly political tools, and clients were not required to repay loans when they pledged political support (Greenidge 1981, 175). Burnham’s tri-sectoral strategy of private sector, state, and cooperatives intended to emancipate the ‘small man’ was a farce and he misused the resources for his own political agenda (Thomas 2007; 1988, 251; Raghunandan and Kistow 1998, 75).

Following the Burnham dictatorship, President Hoyte formulated policies for micro and small businesses. Several micro lending programmes emerged: Small Business Credit Initiative; Commonwealth Youth Credit; Mothers Development Window; and Women’s Affairs Bureau Revolving Loan Fund (Long 1990).¹¹ This facilitation of the establishment of micro-finance was through the Institute for Private Enterprise Development (IPED) (Sookdeo 1997; Duncan 1990, 27-28; Long 1990).¹² All these programmes were especially focused on poor women with an aim to reduce poverty. However, within a few years these organizations were defunct due to mismanagement. In 1992 the PPP under Jagan licensed banks such the Demerara Bank (an Indo-Guyanese owned bank). By the 1990s, the local banking sector was increasingly East Indian which catered to the growing Indo-Guyanese business class.

Today's microfinance sector in Guyana

The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has found that micro-entrepreneurs accounted for 58,327 of the registered businesses in the country (Navagas and Tejerina 2006). Yet there is no policy to assist this low income business group, especially the African and urban-based. As of May 2010, microfinance programmes had reached 10 per cent (less than 6,000 in total) of all micro enterprises (fieldwork, November 2008, and April to May 2010; Navajas and Tejerina 2006). Since 1988, the national association Guyana Small Business Association (GSBA) has been headed by an Afro-Guyanese Muslim. The GSBA is weak and as of May 2010 had a membership of 215 people (interview Zephyr in April 2010).¹³ Certain people in the private sector (who wish to remain anonymous) suggested that GSBA is under-funded and lacks political support from the government because of its Black and perhaps Muslim leadership. After significant delays, in 2010 the state reluctantly created the Small Business Council under the *Small Business Act No. 2 of 2004*, made up of technocrats with no private-sector experience

As of May 2010, Guyana's three main specialized micro lenders reached, at the most, only 10 per cent of the micro entrepreneurial demand for micro-credit. These three retailers are the IPED (mentioned earlier), Small Business Development Trust (SBDT), and DFLSA Microfin. Indo-Guyanese dominate as managers and staff in specialized microfinance organizations. IPED's founder and the current CEO Ramesh Persaud (2010–present) are both Indo-Guyanese. As shown in Table 1, IPED has the largest outreach to clients; however, it must be noted that only 22 per cent of its clientele are female. Using an intersectionality framework one understands that not only is racial bias affecting loan allocations but being female is also negatively affected.

Wealthy Indo-Guyanese businessmen finance two of the specialized microfinance retailers who espouse to help the poor access finance. As highlighted in Table 1, IPED data (2010) reveals that a small number of women are accessing micro loans. In 1994 SBDT was set up by a rich Indo-Guyanese, Sataur Gafoor of Gafsons Industries Limited and Gafsoors Stores Limited (*Kaieteur News* 11 December 2011; microfinance expert interview, 23 April 2010). SBDT is also run by an Indian-born director (married to an Indo-Guyanese), who was vice-president of former President Jagdeo's 2010 budget committee (interview, 15 April 2010; see SBDT Annual Report 2006). In fact, according to its annual report (2006, 2), the SBDT's board members are Indo-Guyanese, a composition that fits with the current state politics.

Table 1: Guyana's Micro and Small Business Lenders (2010)

Type	Name/Inception	# of Clients	% Female Clients	Active in Albouystown	Donors	State Funds
Microfinance	IPED, 1986	4971	22%	Y	Y	Y
	SBDT, 1994	200	68%	N	Y	Y
	Microfin, 2007	429	57%	Y	Y	N
Commercial	Republic, 2008/9	NA	>75%	N	Y	N
	Scotia Bank, 1993	NA	NA	N	N	N
	GBTI	NA	NA	N	N	Y
	Demerara, 1992	NA		N	N	NA
Informal	Box hand	>1000	>80%	Y	N	N
	Penny Bank	>500	>70%	Y	N	N

Sources: Author's survey work: forms completed 6 May 2010 by IPED and 12 May 2010 by DFLSA Microfin. Mohammed Interview, 23 April 2010; Zaman and Williams Interviews, 23 April 2010.

A competing microfinance manager explained to me, 'When money is to be had, this brings out the party colours in this country' (anonymous senior-level banker interview, 16 April 2010). In other words, micro lenders use their Indian cultural ties to access funds from the political elite. SBDT's staff and client-base are mostly Indo-Guyanese and they are unlikely to come from poor urban areas such as Albouystown or Tiger Bay. Of the three microfinance retailers I studied, SBDT appeared to have the closest relationship to the state. In fact, the Indian-born director stated: 'They [Afro-Guyanese] complain about the *coolie man* [Indo-Guyanese] government but it (this government) does more than any other government before (referring to Hoyte and Burnham administrations)' (interview, 15 April 2010). The insinuation here is that the Afro-Guyanese politicians of the past – for example, Burnham or Hoyte – did not advance the cause of the Afro-Guyanese. This director was clear that the bank has a close relationship with Indo-Guyanese ministers and its director sits on presidential committees as needed. Despite this intimate association with political leaders, the director refused to accept that the relationship could be perceived by others as racial bias.

Indo-Guyanese are the majority of workers in the microfinance institutions. Yet, the reports on the sector, such as Rizavi and Ganga Report

(2006), do not mention the Indo-Guyanese dominance in micro-banking programmes. During my visit to SBDT, the seven staff members present were all Indo-Guyanese (interview, 15 April 2010). One huckster, 43-year-old Penny, stated in an interview that she had a hard time getting a micro loan at SBDT: ‘Indians [Indo-Guyanese] get through (...) when I went down to Brickdam [referring to the SBDT office] (...) I had a hard time there, dey lef’ you jus’ so [they just ignore you]’ (Penny interview, 20 April 2010). Here, she comments on the fact that Indo-Guyanese are served first and that she was left waiting by the Indo-Guyanese staff without any help. As long as senior management refuses to recognize the existence of racial bias against Afro-Guyanese, especially of the women in the micro lending environment, there will be no will to create programming to tackle exclusion in financing.

Trinidad’s commercial bank, Development Financing Limited South America (DFLSA), owns the newest microfinance lender, Microfin as of 2010. DFLSA bought Scotia Enterprise’s micro and small business loan portfolio in 2005. Microfin was led by an Afro-Guyanese and had the most diverse staffing (whites, mixed-race, Afro-Guyanese, and Indo-Guyanese). The organization’s human resources data shows that of its staff, 60 per cent are Afro-Guyanese and mixed-races and 40 per cent are Indo-Guyanese (interview, 16 April 2010). Microfin’s senior manager spoke openly on the topic of race and micro lending (unlike many of the Indo-Guyanese managed organizations) and concluded that Indo-Guyanese receive larger micro loans than Afro-Guyanese (*ibid*).¹⁴ As of 2013, Microfin, a far more diverse lender, was sold off to an undisclosed buyer, and it is speculated that the political environment affected its operations.¹⁵

Findings

A racialized hierarchy dominated by Indo-Guyanese limits Black people’s access to economic resources (Williams, Cummings and Marshall 2007, 106). Reports by McGarrell (2010) and Rizavi and Ganga (2006) examining micro/small businesses in Guyana make no mention of the discrimination against Afro-Guyanese business people.¹⁶ Afro-Guyanese economist C.Y. Thomas (1993, 5) argues that in a racially diverse country like Guyana, the likelihood of lending being discriminatory against certain identities is high. Storey’s work (2004) in Trinidad also found a deep-seated bias against Afro-Trinidadian businesses when they applied for microfinance. In this study, 70 per cent of the micro bankers (mainly Indo-Guyanese) I interviewed were unsure how their personal bias affects microfinance allocations. In a focus group, the hucksters, including Indo-Guyanese ones, ar-

gued that Black people are the most discriminated against by microfinance institutions (April 2010).

Guyana has a small microfinance sector so it was relatively easy to meet with the key players in microfinance. I analysed the race of eleven micro bankers in four commercial banks and three specialized microfinance institutions. In participant observation exercises, I noticed that the microfinance managers were well-educated, relatively young with an average age of 45 years, and most were Indo-Guyanese men (73 per cent). Thomas's work (1993) finds that Afro-Guyanese regardless of their class have a hard time getting a loan. In this study it became clear that there was an ingrained personal bias of the Indo-Guyanese males who managed micro-banking programmes and that this affects who gets a loan. Even educated Afro-Guyanese have a hard time accessing economic resources simply because they are Black (several interviews by community activists and hucksters, details cannot be shared, 7 to 13 May 2010). An Afro-Guyanese male expert at an international agency argued,

In this society, certain men [Indo-Guyanese] don't want us [Afro-Guyanese] above them or equal to them in any way. They Indians want to keep us out. So we get the royal runaround when we go to the banks (interview, 22 April 2010).

After interviews with eleven microfinance bankers, I found that staff members held a racial bias combined with a class and gender bias and this affected their analysis of loan portfolios. These bankers claimed that Afro-Guyanese are a bad risk regardless of their education, profession, or economic status (see also Thomas 1993). It is highly unlikely that an Afro-Guyanese (especially women) will obtain a loan. And, if such a woman does access a loan, it is usually far below her requested amount (Focus group, April 2010).

In this case study, 90 per cent of the bankers interviewed said they do not hire loan officers from the marginalized slum communities, but that they hire people based on credentials. This creates a clear class bias in the microfinance sector by people who should be helping poor entrepreneurs. In Guyana, 'normal' hiring practices – that is, those according to Indo-Guyanese standards – that focused entirely on education in hiring were not appropriate to the mission of creating inclusive finance (*Microfinance Bananas Skins* 2011). An important goal of microfinance is to ensure access to finance and inclusiveness. In this case, it is essential to hire individuals who are of African descent and who understand urban communities. Instead, 'qualified' Indo-Guyanese loan officers (who are not from the slums) are hired because of their educational qualifications. This hiring policy rein-

forces exclusion and makes it less likely that microfinance will operate in an inclusionary manner.

Most of the Indo-Guyanese stakeholders and micro lenders (those who claim to support the promise of microfinance) interviewed in this case study (75 per cent, n = 16) made openly negative and/or racist comments about Black business people (see next section). A myth perpetuated openly in the society is that Afro-Guyanese are not business-minded. A booklet titled *Rebirth of the Blackman* by Accabre Nkofi (no date) in circulation in the town was given to me by a businessman that reinforced racial biases against Afro-Guyanese. The 2009 collapse of Globe Trust, owned by rich Afro-Guyanese investors, further reinforced the stereotype of Blacks being inferior in business.¹⁷

Narratives that limit access to finance for Afro-Guyanese

Racialized perspectives are particularly relevant in understanding Black hucksters' access to micro-credit since only two of the eleven managers interviewed were Afro-Guyanese: five of the eleven micro lenders were Indo-Guyanese, and nine in total were non-Blacks (five Indo-Guyanese, two Chinese, two mixed-race). What is even more telling is that sixty per cent (n = 30) of the stakeholders interviewed (of various racial backgrounds) said that microfinance lenders are focused solely on profits, and Indo-Guyanese who run these institutions see Indo-Guyanese clients as preferred clients able to repay loans. A senior manager was of the opinion that Indo-Guyanese had a moral pressure to repay loans.

Afro-Guyanese are less likely to obtain loans because Indo-Guyanese loan officers are less likely to go to the slums to make loans to Afro-Guyanese. Thus, hiring the most technically qualified staff person does not produce a more equitable and inclusive policy. Blatant racialized comments such as these degrade Afro-Guyanese business people. As demonstrated through the following words of an Indo-Guyanese lender, many of the lenders in Guyanese microfinance interviewed for this project support personal prejudice when they should be making policies to reach those individuals who are excluded from formal finance:

A set of people [Afro-Guyanese] are *not business-oriented* by culture. And these people [Afro-Guyanese] have a 'seize mentality' [to take and never to tell a word, a code of silence] and you can never find them (anonymous micro banker) [my emphasis added].

The Black hucksters, as a result of such biases, view lenders as racially prejudiced in the allocation of micro-credit. My findings cannot pinpoint a

particular discriminatory micro-lending policy resulting from racist views against Afro-Guyanese. What is clear, however, is that the attitudes of senior management, which is dominant in people of Indo-Guyanese background, reflect firmly entrenched racist ideas about poor Afro-Guyanese, especially women, as unbankable. In this case, 72 per cent (n = 21) of hucksters interviewed, including poor Indo-Guyanese, said the persons most discriminated against were Afro-Guyanese. The following viewpoint is typical of senior bank employees:

Some people [Indo-Guyanese] are more prone to business ... they have a natural talent for business. A large part of it is cultural [being Indo-Guyanese]. Some Blackmon [Afro-Guyanese] don't want to be rich; they are not dissatisfied with how they are [insinuating low level life-style]. You give them a leg up and they shrug their shoulders – a lot of them [Afro-Guyanese] don't want to get out of the barrel (managing director of an unnamed bank, May 2010, details withheld on request).

Negative comments about Afro-Guyanese like the one above downgrade and humiliate Black people. The slum communities of Albouystown and Tiger Bay are often labelled as dangerous, and the predominantly Black residents are viewed as 'crooks' and 'thieves' (Gibson 2005, 37). In the interview process, it was hard to find an Indo-Guyanese banker (including those working in financial services for the poor) who sympathized with the biased lending practices against Afro-Guyanese. The microfinance managers interviewed (who were mostly Indo-Guyanese) claimed that Afro-Guyanese, and in particular the women, were inherently incapable of sound business practice and also void of moral character (e.g., honesty, willingness to repay). Indo-Guyanese bankers are able to use credit language to persist in their biased lending practices because microfinance policies were not created to assist Afro-Guyanese living in an oppressive racialized environment:

Race is a problem but microfinance practitioners will not discuss it. In my programme, people who do not repay are *always them* (Afro-Guyanese). This is confidential [information] and I ask that you do not use my name or quote me (...) between you and me [referring to me as a person of (partial) Indo-Guyanese descent], it is true they [Afro-Guyanese] don't repay [micro loans]. No one will say this to you as I have (anonymous senior-level micro banker, interview, date withheld).

At first it appears that race is the only identity affecting Black people in Guyana, but using an intersectionality analysis one finds that class and gender issues are also embedded in the everyday operations of micro loan

programmes. Most micro bankers interviewed (7 out of 11) admitted to me that race is a problem, but a 'problem' in the sense that Afro borrowers were less likely to repay. A senior Indian banker justified their exclusionary practice:

I see the people who don't repay [loan defaults] and they were almost always a Blackman (this term refers to women and men).¹⁸ They [Afro-Guyanese] don't have an honest culture (...) they want money but they don't feel to repay [loans] like we Indians. I need [Afro-Guyanese to repay] my money but they [Afro-Guyanese] don't pay me back' (anonymous male banker, interview, date withheld).

The quote above suggests that certain Indo-Guyanese microfinance lenders do not see Afro-Guyanese as trustworthy customers able to honour a debt and repay accordingly.¹⁹ Oftentimes the managers and staff complained that female Afro-Guyanese were not good clients because they did not repay their loans. Afro-Guyanese hucksters and women in particular, are aware of the stigma against them in the microfinance banks. In Albouystown, an Afro fruit seller, Rastaman Franco, aware of the racial bias in micro lending programmes, stated,

IPED is their people, if yuh coolie [Indo-Guyanese] you get bigga loan and easy. (...) Blackmon [Black person] gets pushed round when they come in there [in the bank] [Note: IPED is staffed and managed by Indo-Guyanese. If you are of Indo-Guyanese descent, you can easily qualify for larger sized loans. An Afro-Guyanese loan applicant is not assisted by people at the bank and they get re-directed for loan support] (interview, 20 April 2010).

Rastaman Franco's words reveal that Black micro business people perceive that local banks are biased against them and favour Indo-Guyanese. In fact, most stakeholders (82 per cent, n = 41) interviewed argued that micro bankers, many of whom are Indo-Guyanese, are limited in their capacity to stay neutral because they cannot 'go against the grain': that is, against Indian policies that exclude Afro-Guyanese (anonymous interview, 29 April 2010; Ramharack 2005). The cultural bias is so deeply embedded in the mind-set of the managers in these banks that they will be far more rigid with Afro-Guyanese than Indo-Guyanese.

This perception of ingrained cultural prejudice of Indo-Guyanese to support their own kind makes Afro-Guyanese stakeholders sceptical of Indo-Guyanese micro bankers who claim to help the poor – because to do so would mean going against an exclusionary and racialized policy. Most hucksters interviewed (90 per cent, 26 of the 29) believed that banks led by

Indo-Guyanese prefer Indo-Guyanese clients (interviews and focus group with hucksters, April 2010). The way microfinance operates in Guyana is opposite to the best practice of microfinance, which aims to be inclusive financing, and to target the most vulnerable persons. Most of the micro-bankers interviewed in this study are not fighting against racial bias and in fact, many of them are perpetuating bias against Black entrepreneurs.

The resilient attitudes of Black borrowers

Given the gendered, classed and raced environment, hucksters (29 subjects interviewed) in this project identified the main micro lenders with one of the two dominant racial groups (see Table 2 below). Primarily Afro-Guyanese hucksters have difficulty accessing loans from banks, and the perception of racial affiliation of the main banks suggests that hucksters may also self-exclude themselves as well as be excluded from micro-finance. This finding is more than perception but lived reality by Afro-Guyanese who encounter racism in the society. As highlighted earlier, Indo-Guyanese were forthcoming with their explanations of why Afro-Guyanese are not credible clients for micro loans.

Table 2: Perceived Racial Identities of Banks by Hucksters (2010)

Bank Name	Race
Guyana Bank for Trade and Industry (GBTI)	Indo
Republic Bank	None (neutral)
Scotia Bank Guyana	None (neutral)
Demerara Bank	Indo
Citizens Bank	White/Portuguese
IPED	Indo
DLFSA Microfin	Afro
SBDT	Indo
Bank of Baroda	Indo

Source: Author's in-depth interviews and focus group with 29 hucksters in Albouystown in 2010.

As a consequence, hucksters preferred commercial lenders to the specialized microfinance organizations. Canada's Bank of Nova Scotia and Republic Bank of Trinidad and Tobago (RBTT) were viewed by hucksters as 'neutral' and non-racist, unlike the Indo-Guyanese owned banks.²⁰ Hucksters referred to Demerara Bank as an 'Indian man's bank', a fact undisputed by people who live there. Hucksters were convinced that Bank of Nova

Scotia and RBTT supported their needs better than locally owned banks. As a professor of the University of Guyana easily clarified for me, ‘Afro-Guyanese who feel oppressed by this political environment see international banks taking care of their interests and local banks, which favour the Indian [Indo-Guyanese] ethnic group’ (interview, 13 May 2010). Although I was unable to collect data on the lending practices of international banks, I can confirm that the staffing at the foreign banks such as Bank of Nova Scotia and RBTT were more diverse.

While most of the micro lenders in this study did not see Afro-Guyanese as credit worthy, Black micro-entrepreneurs play a vital role in selling goods from Indo-Guyanese owned businesses to the slum communities. Based on criteria for this project, all hucksters interviewed should have easily qualified for a micro loan.²¹ Yet, most hucksters 83 per cent (n = 25 of a total of 29 interviewed) and 97 per cent of Afro-Guyanese interviewed said they could not access a micro loan (see Table 3, see below).

Black female hucksters said they cannot access credit because of their race. ‘Being Black’ was first and foremost a problem for lenders, followed by their gender and education (a class marker). Given that my sample size had a large sampling of African-Guyanese (55 per cent) it is quite telling that Afro-Guyanese women were least likely to get a loan. As mentioned earlier, IPED, the largest microfinance bank only lends less than a third of its money to females. Table 3 illustrates that only five people in my sample of 29 hucksters had obtained micro loans and three (38 per cent) were Indo-Guyanese males and only one (6 per cent) was an Afro-Guyanese businesswoman (out of 16 interviewed). Afro-Guyanese thus appear to have the hardest time getting a loan compared to Indo-Guyanese and mixed-race persons. Though these figures give some impression of the biases active in micro-banking, it should be noted that the Guyana sample is too small to be statistically significant.

Table 3: Micro Loans by Race and Gender (2010)

	No.	% by race of those who received loans	% by race of total sample
Indo-Guyanese male	3	38%	10%
Douglá female	1	25%	3%
Afro-Guyanese female	1	6%	3%
Total loans accessed	5	17%	
Hucksters [Black] with no loans	25	83%	

Source: Author’s in-depth interviews and focus group with 29 hucksters in Albouystown in 2010.

The way microfinance in Guyana operates suggests that *racial bias is foremost* and class and gender bias is secondary because Indo-Guyanese male lenders are more likely to privilege Indo-Guyanese clients. A major microfinance lender (who requested anonymity) said that their institution uses a (covert) policy of marital status when appraising loan applications. This ‘married condition’ policy often results in the exclusion of Black hucksters, particularly females, who are less likely to be legally married. This manager of the bank told me that the management applies this requirement to reduce repayment risks by allocating loans to couples rather than to a single woman, and this disproportionately affects Afro-Guyanese females.²² In other words, it appears that Black single-mothers are being judged and screened out of microfinance programmes by certain Indo-Guyanese men because these women are viewed as high risk and unbankable.

Conclusion

Micro-credit is viewed by local managers as a tool to assist poor (micro)entrepreneurs; yet micro banking in Guyana is exclusionary. Prejudice and discrimination can be hard to prove. The disregard for social inclusion makes microfinance programmes distrusted by Afro-Guyanese entrepreneurs. The politics of the country has to some degree influenced the narrative of the persons running micro banking programmes, which negatively affects the allocation of these economic resources to Afro-Guyanese. The historical patronage by the state of microenterprise resources since independence to benefit its supporters has created exclusionary micro-banking programmes. Indo-Guyanese male bankers interviewed for this study admitted that their ingrained biases interfered with the allocation of economic resources to Black people in the urban areas. As a result, people of African ancestry are left with limited options of social and economic advancement. This study revealed that systemic discrimination against Black people, especially females, hinders microfinance outreach and economic development.

As highlighted from my interviews, managers in microfinance programmes are consciously focused on ‘help your own kind’ because they believe that Indo-Guyanese have business acumen where Afro-Guyanese do not. Managers also reason that they do not hire many Afro-Guyanese as staff because of the reaction of their (racist) clients (interviews, April 2010). These excuses only serve to further reinforce the exclusion of Afro-Guyanese. This perspective somehow fails to consider recruiting more Afro-Guyanese staff to increase the outreach of Black clients. Because most of these institutions are led by Indo-Guyanese males, they prefer Indo-Guyanese clients. An absence of Afro-Guyanese at senior management lev-

els decreases the likelihood that Blacks will be hired on the frontline. This biased staffing in micro-banking favours Indo-Guyanese and alienates Afro-Guyanese both as staff and as clients. As a result, Black hucksters in the slums feel marginalized by financial programmes that are supposed to assist them.

Guyana's micro-lenders (who claim to work for marginalized people) are failing to react against the deep-seated racial, class and gender bias of the society. I would like to make a few key policy suggestions to end discrimination in micro lending and to protect poor consumers.

- o A leadership training to target Afro-Guyanese bankers can work to ensure that there is an increase of Afro-Guyanese clientele.
- o A review of the 'marriage condition' policy should be undertaken so that it no longer screens out loan applicants who are not legally married, thus negatively affecting Afro-Guyanese women.
- o A more diverse board from various socio-economic and racial backgrounds can rethink programming so that it is culturally and gender inclusive. So much of the microfinance goals are built on people and trust; for Guyana's micro-banking programs to adhere to best practice microfinance, there should be a zero tolerance for political influence in the business operations (meaning no ties to political parties).
- o Micro-banking institutions that are keen on diversity should disaggregate their loan data by gender, race, age and location to ensure equal opportunity and a fair allocation of financial services to a cross-section of the population.

An important tenet of microfinance is to reach excluded people like Afro-Guyanese, and in particular the women. The mind-set of Indo-Guyanese managers and their staff – which reflect the attitudes of the demeaning narratives that pervade society – must start with awareness.

* * *

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Notes

1. Many conferences have recognized microfinance as an important intervention: Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development (1975); Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995); Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010; and International Conference on Financing for Development in 2002.
2. See also the Microcredit Summit Campaign www.microcreditsummit.org, retrieved 2003-06-27.
3. Information taken from the author's survey results of 11 micro-banks in April and May 2010.
4. This case is a part of a larger comparative study of close to 500 interviews in the Caribbean over four years for doctoral field work (Hossein 2012).
5. In Guyana, the term '*dougl'a*' refers to mixed-race persons of East Indian and African races (Gibson 2005, 69; St. Pierre 1999, 133).
6. I recognize that formalized microfinance institutions are not the same as informal banks, but the idea of lending to low income self-employed persons is historically a well-established concept in the Caribbean.
7. Mars (1995, 171) says that the state places a high premium on ethnic partisanship.
8. President Donald Ramotar of the PPP won the national election for a five-year term (BBC, 2 December 2011) after this field work was completed.
9. Dawn Holder, an Afro-Guyanese lawyer, stated that Indo-Guyanese populated regions are favoured by economic inputs from the state and that perpetuates exclusion of Afro-Guyanese (Spotlight television show, 22 April 2010).
10. Gibson (2006, 376) notes that Afro-Guyanese are labelled as evil, with names such as 'criminals' and 'rapists' to define them by Indo-Guyanese; whereas Indo-Guyanese are defined as good.
11. The Small Business Credit Initiative (SBCI) closed down in 1997 due to management issues (Navajas and Terejina 2006, 2).

12. IPED (first named Institute of Small Enterprise Development) received US\$ 2.8M from USAID's PL480 project and Canadian funding.
13. See the *Stabroek* article (2010) for more information on the GBSA at <http://www.stabroeknews.com/2010/business/05/14/whither-the-guyana-small-business-association/>.
14. Indo-Guyanese tap into what is called a 'buddy system' (Indo-Guyanese local term for a male relative as a cousin or uncle) for funds under US\$ 1,500. Afro-Guyanese usually have less disposable income within families and seek loans under US\$ 500. This seems to suggest a lack of family networks (with money) is the reason that Afro-Guyanese are not considered (that is, are penalized) for these loans.
15. On 14 June 2013, it was confirmed to me by Prakash Dhanraj, CEO Microfin in Trinidad that the Guyana entity has been sold off (interview in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad).
16. A report published by McGarrell (2010) analyzing Guyana's micro and small enterprise failed to mention the influence of racial bias on the allocation of resources. McGarrell finds that micro and small enterprise is a high priority for the state, but gives no evidence as to state support for this sector. The 2010 budget only allocated about US\$ 75,000 to the entire small business sector (previous years the allocation was only US\$ 7,500). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Bank of Guyana also published a report (Rizavi and Ganga 2006) where they found that microfinance is mostly invested in the rural areas (where the Indo-Guyanese mostly reside). Both reports failed to consider identity politics in poverty lending programs.
17. Globe Trust, an investment company founded by an Afro-Guyanese, was liquidated in October 2009. *Stabroek News*: <http://www.stabroeknews.com/2010/stories/05/05/liquidator-signals-%E2%80%98beginning-of-end%E2%80%99-for-globe-trust/>.
18. The term 'Blackman' refers to men and women of African-Guyanese descent. This term seemed racist to me, but it was widely used to refer to Black people.
19. None of the micro lenders who made such claims could provide me with evidence, despite requests for this information.
20. In 2010, both international banks were led by non Indo-Guyanese: Amanda St. Aubyn and John N. Alves, which may explain people's views that they are not Indo-Guyanese operated banks. Guyanese academic, Kadasi Ceres made a valid point that hucksters base their ideas on interactions with day-to-day staff persons.
21. Having worked in microfinance industry for 15 years, including managing a village bank, I was able to understand the requirements for screening clients with certain criteria: at least five years of experience in business, an existing business, social networks of individuals to assist them if they are unable to repay the loan and a small savings.
22. See Rahman (1999, 68) on the hidden transcript by Grameen to exclude males from the programs. Micro-bankers felt comfortable telling me that they apply this married condition off the record.

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