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M.O.M. vs. Millionaires: The Fight for Equal Opportunities

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M.O.M. vs. Millionaires: The Fight for Equal Opportunities



By: Imani Edwards

Chapter 1

Race-Class Complex and Neoliberalism: Understanding Urban Black and Latino Poverty

The Race-Class Complex

Racial and social inequality is major influence on areas like the South Bronx that lack resources. It is especially important to know how race plays a role in the poor housing, employment, environmental, and public school conditions in the South Bronx and to what extent it does. Using Wilson's race-complex books, I will explain how over the years, direct racial inequality has been translated into social class inequality.

In one of his earlier books, *The Declining Significance of Race*, Wilson defines "class" as:

*" . . . any group of people who have more or less similar goods, services or skills to offer for income in a given economic order and who therefore receive similar financial remuneration in the marketplace."*¹

The population of the South Bronx ^{is} ~~are~~ considered of the same class based on Wilson's definition; the low class. They are allocated the same resources based on their income that extends from the foods that they eat, to the education and housing that they receive. Class plays a major role in the opportunities that the residents of the South Bronx receive; which explains their comparatively limited resources to that of richer New York families.

In *The Declining Significance of Race*, Wilson also splits the period of race relations in America into three stages: Pre-Industrial, Industrial, and Modern Industrial.

¹ William Julius Wilson. *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978. Preface

Pre-Industrial and Industrial are characterized by "overt efforts of whites to solidify economic racial domination through various forms of juridical, political, and social discrimination"² in order to keep blacks in the lower rung of society. For example, Jim Crow laws and any laws that prohibited people of color from getting quality education, housing, and jobs were blatant attempts by whites to keep blacks oppressed. With time and the passage of new laws, these types of actions were made illegal and not socially acceptable.

As the influence of race on minority class-stratification decreases, social class takes on greater importance in determining the "life chances" for minority individuals. This means that during the Pre-Civil Rights Era, race was a bigger factor in determining African Americans' and Latinos' positions on the social ladder as opposed to class. Even though Wilson says that race had declined in importance when it comes to "life chances," he still believes that there is an element of indirect racism that goes on today.

In *More Than Just Race*, a more recent book from Wilson, he discusses modern-day racism, which is more indirect and socially acceptable. Generally, he believes that there are structural forces among some of the factors that contribute to racial inequality. Structural forces are social acts and processes that contribute to differences in poverty and employment rate among racial groups. Some examples of structural forces are stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination in hiring, job promotions, admissions to educational institutions, and housing³, as well as racial profiling by police. Stanford research shows from an experiment conducted in Chicago and Boston in 2001 and

² William Julius Wilson. *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978.

³ William Julius Wilson. *More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009. p.5

2002, that the average call-back for women with "white-sounding" names was greater than the average call-back for women with "black-sounding" names in the job interview sector⁴This is also an example of structural forces, discrimination in hiring in particular, that prevents blacks from receiving jobs based on their race. Structural forces are part of the reason why residents in the South Bronx do not receive jobs. When the green jobs and green job training programs were placed in New York, very few South Bronx residents, low income blacks and Latinos, were able to benefit from the new jobs because either they did not know about them or they lost the position to more qualified competitors. The job training programs that have been presented to the South Bronx residents in the past have been designed for them to fail; not only have the programs taught unpractical skills, but they would send multiple participants to a job that is hiring very few people or not hiring at all. Through discrimination in hiring, jobs, and job training programs, the blacks and Latinos of the South Bronx find it nearly impossible to find quality jobs.

Currently, we live in a time where racial inequality is more discreet, especially since the "black experience" is more stratified than it was before the passing of Civil Rights Laws. In the preface of *Declining Significance of Race*, Wilson makes it a point to state that he cannot speak universally for all black Americans since they are "stratified into groups whose members range from those who are affluent to those who are impoverished." I must admit I initially felt slightly awkward going into situations such as public schools and MOM meetings because I felt that there is an expectation of me to understand where they are coming from because I am a minority as well. I feel an

⁴ The Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality. "Racial Discrimination." 2005-2009. 28 April 2011. <<http://www.stanford.edu/group/scspi/cgi-bin/facts.php>>

element of guilt that I can't share that experience with them since, race has, and still does to a certain degree, place limitations on blacks and Latinos from all backgrounds. But the black middle class now identifies more with class than with race in comparison to its counterparts in earlier decades. Even though blacks and Latinos of all social classes experience racism, racial inequality hits the lower class the hardest, since they are least likely to benefit from affirmative action laws and cannot socially mobilize to more financially secure position. Ultimately, the black and Latino lower class in America feel the brunt of racial inequality, since they have to battle it along with class inequality.

In the South Bronx, the residents suffer from poor public housing, poor public schools, and poor quality jobs. One of the problems associated with the high unemployment is that though the South Bronx NYCHA residents participate in job training programs; they still have problems finding or keeping jobs. The will and desire to work is there, but there is a lack of resources. Therefore, you cannot blame all of the unemployed with not trying to work or being lazy. If residents are attempting to work, then unemployment is not a fault of theirs; there are a combination of factors that prevent them from gaining jobs and financial security.

Neoliberalism and Government's Role

Besides racial and class discrimination in job distribution, hiring, and job training programs, there are other forces that contribute to urban black and Latino poverty in America as well. With neoliberalism and cheap sweatshop labor overseas, there is less incentive for private American manufacturers to hire lower-class Americans for work. With manufacturing and low-skilled jobs moved overseas, it makes it more difficult for the lower class to become employed. Also, since the American economy is not doing

so well, employers are able to be more selective in the hiring process⁵. The lower class is the last to place their hands in the "job" cookie jar in times of economic decline. With the economy recovering from a recession, coupled with the substitution of sweatshop labor as a replacement for manufacturing jobs in the United States, lower class unskilled workers are finding it extremely difficult to find jobs.

In the Southeast Asian states of Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, the low-skilled population is experiencing similar oppressors to that of the lower class in America. The low-skilled labor and migrants in Southeast Asia receive fewer rights, including labor rights, than the citizens and foreigners. The two groups, viewed as the poor and rich respectively, are placed in separate zones and these zones determine what kind of life an individual lives, with drastic differences in resources. People of higher market value are given citizenship and rights as oppose to those with less skills. This situation is known as graduated sovereignty,⁶ which is applicable to situation in the United States with the federal and state cuts to public programs; basic rights to education and healthcare are withheld from the poor.

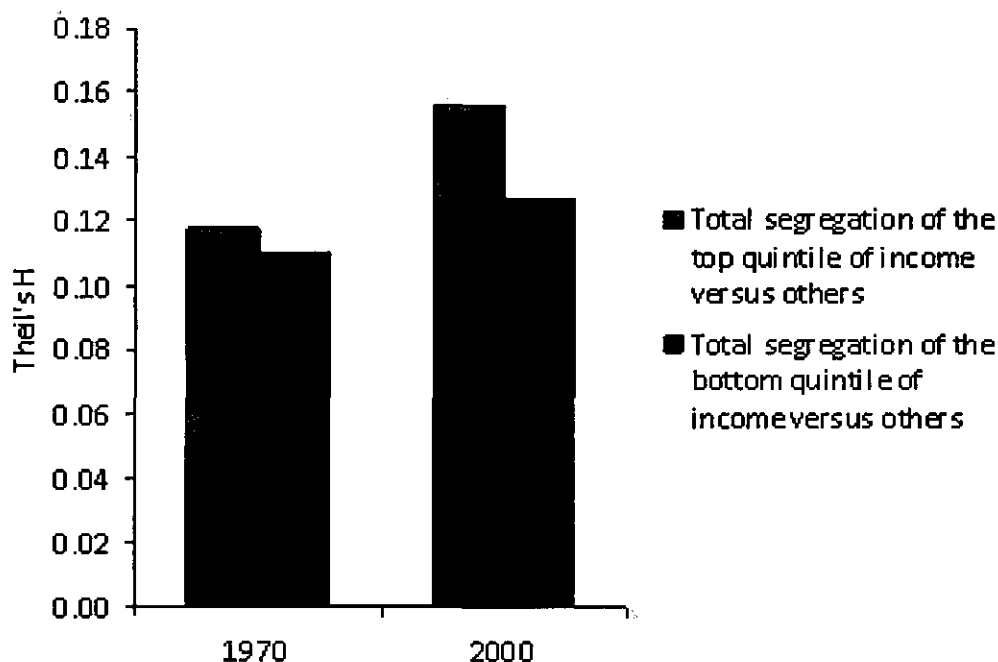
With housing In the United States, housing segregation based on income has increased over the years. According to a Stanford study, the American rich and poor have been less likely to live in the same neighborhoods as they used to.⁷

⁵ More Than Just Race, p.12

⁶ Aihwa Ong. *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. p.78

⁷ The Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality. "Residential Segregation." 2005-2009. 28 April 2011. <<http://www.stanford.edu/group/scspi/cgi-bin/facts.php>>

Class-based segregation:



The rich are currently lightly taxed on income, therefore, public infrastructure suffers. In their neighborhoods, the rich can afford to pay more to send their children to private schools, therefore, they do not feel obligated to have to spend their money, through taxes, in the public education system. In New York City, the public schools in areas, like the South Bronx, have suffered due to budget cuts. About half the schools in the South Bronx are labeled PLA, persistently lowest achieving schools; these schools are among the first to experience cuts in funding.⁸ With segregated housing, lack of job resources, and the elimination of many public schools, the future of South Bronx residents looks very bleak.

⁸ Personal Interview #3, Akilah

Right now, in our nation, 1% of the people control one quarter of the wealth.⁹ That same one percent experienced ^{an} 18% increase in their income, while the people in the middle have experienced a decline. Economists to explain why the rich deserve their extravagant incomes use the “marginal-productivity theory”. Under this theory, the rich are believed to hold jobs that benefit the economy more than the poor; this places higher value on the rich’s work over the poor’s labor. However, since the bail out on Wall Street by the federal government in 2008, Americans are wondering when the “trickle down” effect will take its course. Bailing the rich bankers out of fiscal crisis did not prevent the rest of us for being negatively affected by the recession. The rich bankers and other wealthy people who hold positions of power, are given a ridiculous amount of money, their actions should benefit the rest of society.

A combination of race and class is must be considered to understand wealth inequality in America, as well as urban black and Latino poverty. With structural forces preventing people of color from receiving jobs and other important resources and residential discrimination, related to class discrimination, producing some neighborhoods that have more opportunities than others, lower class blacks and Latinos of the South Bronx are in a very undesirable position; this position prevents social mobility. Not only do racial and class discrimination play a role in the South Bronx residents’ position, but the economy and the shift of jobs overseas also predicts their fate. It is the role of community organizations, like Mothers on the Move, to mobilize the disadvantaged in order to guarantee that they will receive basic necessities such as jobs, healthcare, schools, housing, and clean air to breathe.

⁹ Joseph E. Stiglitz. “Inequality: Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%.” Vanity Fair. May 2011. 28 April 2011. <<http://www.vanityfair.com/society/features/2011/05/top-one-percent-201105>>

Chapter 2

Mothers on the Move: The History and Her Objectives

"...The schools in the South Bronx neighborhoods of Hunts Point and Longwood ranked as some of the poorest performing in New York City. The local school district, dominated for over twenty years by leaders who ran it for the benefit of only a few, was a dramatic example of inequality and racial segregation. It divided resources between the wealthier white neighborhoods to the north and the low-income Black and Latino neighborhoods to the south."¹⁰

Mothers on the Move (MOM), initially known as Parent Organizing and Education Project (POEP), was founded in 1992 to combat the poor quality public schools, and later expanded to confront other issues such as pollution, high unemployment, and poor public housing in the South Bronx area. Mili Bonilla, a South Bronx native and former organizer for a different South Bronx organization, and Barbara Gross, a teacher, founded it, but discovered it was able to thrive with the support of the support of parents from the South Bronx community. Bonilla and Gross both wanted MOM to be a vehicle used by the community to help residents become politically active and bring awareness to the issues that directly affected them. Their role, as organizers, was to recruit residents of the neighborhood to join the organization and provide them with the information and skills necessary to develop school improvement campaigns. If there were residents who showed consistent activism, the organizer's role was to challenge

¹⁰ Karp, Jessica, Kavitha Mediratta. *Parent Power and Urban School Reform: The Story of Mothers on the Move*. New York: New York University, 2003.

them to take on more demanding leadership roles. So, from the start, MOM was designed to become independent from people who were not residents and reliant on the activism of South Bronx residents.

When I first went to visit Mothers on the Move headquarters, I showed up unannounced. To my dismay, the headquarters was closed. As I walked back up to the subway station, I noticed that it was close to eleven o'clock and maybe I should go back and see if they were open. The door was opened. I formally introduced myself to a coworker of Ms. Salaman's and casually explained why I was stopping by. A few minutes later, Ms. Wanda Salaman walked through the door. I briefly explained to her who I was, since we ^{had} ~~have~~ been exchanging emails prior to this meeting, and why I was there. As nervous as I appeared to be, Wanda and her coworkers were very easy going and friendly. The organization seemed to function like the beauty salon that I used to attend when I was growing up; come when you want, no appointments necessary.

While learning about MOM's history, I felt that the beginning of MOM reminded me of the infamous Brown v. Board of Education case which established that separate school systems were not equal and black students were suffering academically as a result. Often, when people addressed the problem of poor performance of the community's children in the South Bronx school system during the 1990s, it was blamed on the student's lack of effort. The Bronx Educational Services, a community-based provider of adult educational programs¹¹, made it a priority to fix the school system in the area due to the fact that better schools led to less reliance on adult educational programs in the future.

¹¹ Jessica Karp and Kavitha Mediratta. *Parent Power and Urban School Reform: The Story of Mothers on the Move*. New York: New York University, 2003

The BES scheduled an appointment to visit a class due to their discontent with the insufficient public schools and discovered that low performance was not due to laziness, but due to the public policies in place. They discovered the teachers' performance as unsatisfactory since they did not push the students to create larger goals for themselves. As a result, the students underachieved due to lack of motivation from teachers. The attitude of the teachers and the sizes of classes were major factors in the undesirable performance rate. The black and Latino students were not excelling in academics because the "separate but equal" school system was failing them.

Another theme that was found in the Civil Rights Movement was the importance of the members of the community themselves being in charge of M.O.M. In his earlier years, Malcolm X believed that blacks should not have white people in head positions of organizations working towards racial equality for blacks; white people represented "the man" (the government) and would indicate black peoples insufficiency to function without white Americans' assistance. Even though it was a radical idea at the time, I understand why he would suggest this policy, especially since blacks were seen as inferior at the time. Black people as executive officers in their organizations was meant to prove the point that black people are capable of organizing and be a force to be reckoned with. Mothers on the Move seems to follow that approach.

Along with better schools, MOM also works towards bringing efficient jobs, better housing, and less pollution to the South Bronx. They discover the issues that they work to combat by talking to residents and conducting surveys and organizing focus groups. From there, they have created director positions for people who appear the most active and passionate about the issues.

One of the major issues is unemployment and underemployment, which is caused by ineffective job training programs, as well as a lack of jobs. There is also a need for job creation as well. Interestingly enough, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) has been suffering from this low employment rate and has been accumulating a deficit as a result.¹² It would benefit the NYCHA, and the government for the lower class residents of public housing to be employed.

Along with ^{unemployed} low employment rate issues, the South Bronx experiences serious health issues. The Bronx has become the borough that with the highest asthma rate in the city, at 8.9%.¹³ The major source of the asthma rate in the Bronx, which caused it to be the highest in the city, has been attributed to air pollution. Polluting industries such as the New York Organic Fertilizer Company (NYOFCO) were traced as major causes of the poor air quality. There is a quote, from the Mothers on the Move website that encompasses the battle for less pollution:

"In 2008, the Natural Resources Defense Council sued the plant on behalf of a community group called Mothers on the Move along with 10 local residents. Last year, the state attorney general, Andrew M. Cuomo, also filed a public-nuisance lawsuit against the company. A settlement is being negotiated, said Albert Y. Huang, a lawyer with the Natural Resources Defense Council . . . For many, it

¹² MOM and Urban Justice Center. *South Bronx Residents Solution on Greening Our 'Hood (Green Job Report)*. New York

¹³ *South Bronx Residents Solution on Greening Our 'Hood*, p. 5

*became a symbol of the city's disregard for Hunts Point, a neighborhood made up predominantly of low-income and minority families."*¹⁴

Another major problem is the poor quality public housing, NYCHA in particular. The NYCHA part of the local government has not been regulated properly, which has led to increases in rent and service cut for the NYCHA residents. The government's disinvestment in the NYCHA program has also resulted in poor maintenance, plus an increase in mold, rodents, and cockroaches, which exacerbates the poor health conditions of asthma patients in the South Bronx

In order to raise awareness of government, MOM must rally enough support from the community. One of the things that MOM does in order to get people politically active and informed, is to hold meetings, on issues ranging from public housing to public schools. "Typically, the housing meetings doesn't have many attendees", said Nova Strachan, Housing Justice Director at MOM, before a housing meeting. The first housing meeting that I have attended was held at a Women's Empowerment facility. There were about nine to ten of us, including Lindsay, from the Urban Justice Center, a few elderly people, Nova, Yves, a MOM member in his late twenties, a public school teacher in her early thirties, and myself in attendance. The main objective of that meeting was to discuss the Green Job⁴ Report, a report issued by the Urban Justice Center and MOM in order to improve the poor conditions in the area. One issue that was raised was the fact that when NYCHA residents get~~ting~~ a job, rent is increased, so NYCHA residents feel penalized for obtaining a job. Their rent is increased because they can afford to pay a higher rent since they are no longer unemployed. This rent

¹⁴ MOM. Mothers on the Move. 2006. 14 April 2011
<<http://www.mothersonthemove.org/index.html>>

increase also makes it harder for lower income residents to save, which undermines social mobility.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development gets eight billion dollars annually to go towards low-income community members' jobs and job training programs, and NYCHA receives seven hundred million of that.¹⁵ The members of the housing meeting feel that public housing has a lot of capital but they are not using it properly. Essentially, government regulation is needed, especially in the HUD division.

Lindsay from the Urban Justice Center predicted that the federal funding would not have a direct effect on the local level. However, Yves feels that it will eventually find its way to the local government and effect funding in their community. Another objective of the meeting was to discuss S.O.S. (Save Our Schools). Nova asked this rhetorical question: How can you find the money to build a jail and not a school?" the group talked about organizing an Empowerment March in mid-April to bring greater awareness to the people of the South Bronx.

Along with the housing meeting, I also had the pleasure of spending one Friday afternoon with MOM representatives at a Right to the City NYC meeting, which was held in Harlem. Right to the City (RTTC) is a national alliance of community organizations from eight cities across the country as well as researchers, lawyers, academics, and other allies.¹⁶ It was formed in 2007 to combat gentrification along with other drastic changes imposed on big cities. Historically, big cities have been polarized socially and racially; the rich and the poor co-exist in them but in different neighborhoods. However, RTTC has been formed to give organizations, like MOM, a

¹⁵ Housing meeting

¹⁶ Right to the City NYC. 28 April 2011. <<http://www.righttothecity.org/>>

voice in what is happening in their neighborhoods. MOM along with numerous other community organizations, are members of the NYC charter of Right to the City.

In this meeting, five organizations were present, Community Volunteers Help (CVH), Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAAV), Families United for Social Equality (FUSEE), MOM, and Picture The Homeless (PTH). Although each group felt disadvantaged, the groups had varied approaches and strategies which made it more difficult for them to completely agree on what actions needed to be taken. However, they were able to agree on a few things by the end of the meeting.

The groups had to vote yes or no on actions and issues that RTTC NYC should focus on. Out of all of these actions, most, if not all, of the organizations that participated in this meeting agreed on BOFA (Bunch of Fucking Actions). BOFA consisted of a series of actions that were meant to be immediate and attention grabbing. Especially with the budget cut proposal pending, BOFA were meant to require quick preparation and an immediate carry-out of the action. For example, marching around Yankee Stadium and holding up traffic in order to bring awareness to the disadvantaged, the black and Latino poor, in the city would be considered an action. BOFAs require taking direct immediate action that people, politicians in particular, could see and were forced to react to.

As I was walking through Harlem with Yves, a member of M.O.M., we discussed the pros and cons of the meeting. He felt that BOFA is needed to create a spark and to get politicians to hear them. However, he did not agree with one attendee's militancy. This participant in the meeting was homeless and was justifying violence in order to get his voice heard. The man claimed that a person should not get mad at a homeless

person if they use violence in order to eat and survive. Yves and I agreed to disagree with this man's logic. The subject of the protest at Albany, to confront Andrew Cuomo about the issues, was discussed as well. The people directing the meeting asked each organization how many people they could turn out for the rally and how many were willing to get arrested. A lot of people were hesitant about the latter and I completely understand why. If we are addressing people on the lower tier of the economic strata, being out of work would have a huge penalty on their families' survival. The NYC working-class residents on ground level were not looking to get arrested, seeing as if that makes it even more difficult for them to maintain jobs and obtain financial security.

In late March, after the RTTC meeting, I was casually talking to Nova, the housing director, when she told me that she has just returned from a Right to the City meeting in California. From that point on, I knew that RTTC was a "big time" organization and important factor in MOM's life. Despite each organization mentioning how occupied they were with the individual goals of their organization, they still understood the importance of collective community action. With more people, more noise can be made, and with more noise, more change can transpire; having the support of other organizations with similar needs city-wide and also nation-wide are equally important in keeping the organization going. ✓

Through the meeting, I've come to realize how intricate community organizations are. They are constantly working on the next move and are strategic in every move that they make. They also rely on other community organizations that share similar interests to join the events that they plan to raise awareness.

Chapter 3

Politics, Budget Cuts and the Green Job Report

Mothers on the Move is a grassroots organization that deals with people who would not have a strong voice in the government without community organization. MOM gets the people of the South Bronx, mainly of black and Latino descent, to rally and stage other types of actions in order to have their needs met. The MOM headquarters has been a place where residents could go with issues dealing with New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) or any other sectors of the government. This organization, from the start, has been an emissary that connected the South Bronx constituents with the government. The Housing Justice department of MOM, headed by Nova, and the unemployment sector deal with NYCHA. When addressing the concerns of jobs, gentrification, public schools, and environmental racism, MOM has to address local government officials, City Council people, the Bronx Borough president, the mayor, as well as larger powers within the state and federal governments, Assembly people and Congress people.

Along with trying to improve public schools, MOM has worked towards better air quality from the start. Using support from the community and government officials, MOM campaigned to remove a particular fertilizer factory from the community. New York Organic Fertilizer Company (NYOFCO), a fertilizer industry, placed a factory in the South Bronx in 1992 and, from that point on, every summer in Hunt's Point was unbearable for residents and the air quality diminished. The plant was responsible for processing human waste, from New York City Department of Environmental

Protection's (DEP) wastewater treatment plants, into fertilizer pellets for 18 years.¹⁷ Not only was this industry contributing to pollution, but also it was not up to health code and following proper disposal regulations.

The New York State Fertilizer Company's factory in Hunt's Point contributed to the poor air quality for years until MOM intervened. With the help of the Clean Air Campaign, MOM rallied, protested, and held meetings with City Council members, Assembly members and the Bronx Borough president in order to have their goals accomplished. Eventually, MOM got enough support for local officials, such as Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr., to get the attention of the attorney general, who filed a lawsuit against the company. In 2010, a settlement was negotiated which required all sewage to be rerouted elsewhere for two years while an environmental survey is completed.¹⁸ As a result, NYOFCO had to shut down the factory in the South Bronx and dismantle it. However, Nova has informed me that the factory in Hunt's Point has not been torn down yet because NYOFCO is trying to reach an agreement to re-institute the factory, with the conditions of health codes and proper factory regulations put in place.

Along with the other various polluting industries in the South Bronx, the Bruckner Expressway and the Cross Bronx Expressway also contribute to the pollution. These routes are heavily used on a regular basis and, in effect, heighten the air pollution.

Maria, a member of MOM, has said that MOM has fought for trucks not to drive on the main streets, ^{a campaign} which was meant to lessen the exposure of pollution to the residents, as a result, very few trucks run on the main streets.

¹⁷ MOM website. New York, 2006. <<http://www.mothersonthemove.org/about.html>>

¹⁸

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Along with the other various polluting industries in the South Bronx, the Bruckner Expressway and the Cross Bronx Expressway also contribute to the pollution. They are heavily used on a regular basis and, in effect, heighten the air pollution. Maria, a member of MOM, has said that MOM has fought for trucks not to drive on the secondary streets, which was meant to lessen the exposure of pollution to the residents, as a result, very few trucks run on the secondary streets.

Trucks and pollution-creating industries are main causes of the high asthma rate in the South Bronx. Two of the five respondents have informed me that they have asthma and they believe that it is due to the high pollution rate in the area. Both respondents are in leadership positions and believe that MOM will continue to combat the high pollution in the area. The ultimate weapon that MOM has to defeat high

pollution is the Green Job Report, which it believed to combat the high unemployment as well as better public housing and lessen pollution in the area.

The high pollution causes the Bronx to have the highest asthma rate in the city at 8.9%. While discussing pollution in the South Bronx, Nova left me with much to think about after talking about racism and how it plays into the South Bronx. She feels that it is no coincidence that a lot of industries place factories in the area and why there is a high pollution rate in the area. She attributes it to racism based ^{on} ~~off~~ of the fact that the area consists mainly of minorities, people of color, and I could hardly blame her for thinking that way. Many of the people that share her view of the issues are of color and people in Albany and government positions are mainly white. Although she believes in some government officials, Nova does not have faith in Mayor Bloomberg or Gov. Cuomo.

Ultimately, South Bronx residents have been victims of institutions that are bigger than them; two very popular highways, a once obstructive fertilizer industry, and a retail sector that provides the community with cheap unhealthy foods stands in their way to optimal health.

The Green Job Report was created in the hopes of lessening unemployment, improving public housing, and decreasing pollution. Along with the highest asthma rate, the Bronx has the highest unemployment rate in New York State. The Bronx had an unemployment rate of 12.6%, compared to Manhattan's rate of 7.9%, as of July 2010¹⁹. The sad part about that is that in the South Bronx, in particular, people don't believe in the job training programs. When South Bronx residents participate in the programs and

¹⁹ MOM and Urban Justice Center. *South Bronx Residents Solution on Greening Our 'Hood (Green Job Report)*. New York

trained, they have no jobs to go to. At one housing meeting, I can recall one MOM member, a woman in the mid thirties to forties range, feeling hopeless about her job situation. She attended a job training program and still remains unemployed. She questioned why she learned new skills if the skills would not bring her a job. In the report, which was created by Mothers on the Move and the Urban Justice Center's Community Development Project, they surveyed South Bronx residents about job search programs in the area. Only forty-six percent of the focus groups heard of or participated in ^{the activities of} the South Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation; a group that supplied adult education and career development courses. Only forty-six percent heard of or participated in the Workforce 1 program, another program, which is funded by the New York City government, designed to aid people in the community with high unemployment. People in these focus groups who have participated in the job search programs have had negative experiences with them and claimed that the jobs set them up for failure by sending them to jobs that weren't hiring and reminding them that their lack of education makes it next to impossible for them to compete with other more skilled competitors.

To combat unemployment, MOM advocates a living wage requirement, more effective job training programs, and encouraging the development of green collar industries in the South Bronx area. In order to get this report in full effect, MOM has to work closely with NYCHA officials, who would be funding the program. The organization has started the report and has a pilot program in one housing development to see how effective it is. The Empowerment March on April 15 kicked off the Green Job Report

pilot program for green job training, which was a short walk through the neighborhood to gain awareness of the new program.

After a few interviews and spending time at MOM events, I've realized that the main health issues in the South Bronx are asthma and obesity. South Bronx has high rate of obesity, which leads to other health issues such as diabetes and high blood pressure. While being at MOM events, I have constantly heard people mention asthma as a huge concern. With asthma linked to the environmental racism and the big corporations taking advantage of those with little political power, obesity is also linked to class discrimination. South Bronx residents suffer from limited availability of fresh organic foods. With Trader Joe's and or stores like that not in the vicinity and car transportation being expensive, it is important to have fresh fruits and vegetables for sale in the area; not only for it to be located in the community, but for the fruits and vegetables to be at an affordable price.

New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) has been experiencing a "continual disinvestment" from the government, and this has results in the poor quality public housing. Rent is rising and cuts in services for residents are being made. Two respondents of my questionnaire have informed me that recently from early to mid 2000's, the management office has gone digital. Instead of walking to the management office to get repairs done, a NYCHA resident now has to call downtown, a 718 number, in order to get these repairs addressed and even after calling, it takes time for the maintenance people to fix the problems. Residents are now forced to go without the repairs or get enough money together to pay for the repairs that need to be made. Inefficiency in NYCHA management can be linked to the huge NYCHA deficit that they

are experiencing, which is linked to the high unemployment rate of residents who cannot pay the amount necessary to keep the NYCHA branch running smoothly. The NYCHA deficit makes it difficult for them to fund the Green Job Report, however, if they can get enough money together for the problem, it will benefit them in the future.

Residents with jobs ^{means} equates to residents with money who can pay the initial amount for rent. Rent is based ^{on} off of one's income, so comparing the rent of an unemployed individual and the rent of an employed individual would show that an employed resident's rent is more monetarily beneficial to NYCHA and their deficit.

In NYCHA housing, some residents experience cockroaches, rodents, and mold, which are detrimental to people with asthma. Working class minorities are placed in these housing projects and are expected to pay rent to live there. I've visited the houses on Kelley Street, adjacent to the MOM office, and the inside ^s of the building were horrific. Even with shoes on, one ^{has} not feel comfortable walking into those buildings. Some of the residents in the buildings were HIV -positive; which meant that that ~~their~~ apartment might be the last place that they vacate. It's a sad day to see buildings, in which people pay to live in, being neglected. I've heard of mixture of reasons why the buildings are unkempt, some people ^{blame} believe the residents for urinating in the elevators and not respecting their property, some blame NYCHA for not regulating cleanliness in the housing developments or some believe it's a mixture of both. One of the Youth on the Move, the youth sector of MOM, members mentioned to me the "broken window" theory that he has learned at school. While discussing the theory with me, he believed that the South Bronx is dirty because residents and the government don't keep it clean. If a location is already dirty and has crime, this situation makes it easy for one person to

not respect the area, through not cleaning up after their dog or vandalizing property. I've learned about the theory before in my New York City Politics class, but now, it has been brought to life and actualized through my experiences with MOM.

From personal experiences, it appears as if many lower-class minorities generally do not believe in the government. Along with not having complete faith in the government, some distrust the police, due to their failed attempts to distinguish criminals from innocent residents of the housing projects. While working for the Bill Thompson for Mayor Campaign, I've come across many lower class Bronx residents who were not interested in voting. Some do not vote because they do not believe that their vote matters. In effect, the people who do not vote will not be heard by the government officials, who want to get reelected will only work in the interest of those who vote in their district; not voting equates to not having a say in government.

Hypothetically speaking, if they do vote, and the minorities who do vote elect minority candidates, it would be interesting to know if that has an effect on the improvement of the South Bronx. In *Racial Politics in American Cities*, the authors want to figure out how much power minorities have, politically, in big cities, and if electing minority officials make a difference in the change that minorities want to see. Rufus Browning, the co-author, believes that, during to the 50s, it might seem like a great achievement for there to be minorities in local government positions, such as mayors and council members that we have today in New York City, but that does not mean that the work is done²⁰. Representation is important however it does not guarantee that

²⁰ Rufus P. Browning, Dale Rogers Marshall, David H. Tabb. *Racial Politics in American Cities*. New York : Longman, 1990. p. 9

minority interests will be taken into account fully; therefore elected minority officials does not necessarily correlate to inner-city minority constituents having a stronger say in local government. Hearing about a few local minority government officials who claim to work with MOM, but, in actuality, do not, weakens the theory that representation in the government equates to minority political power.

But, with community organization, South Bronx residents do have a stronger voice. One action, dealing with MOM's political leverage, was the Albany trip in March. On Wednesday March 9th, I made my way to Albany with MOM to lobby against Cuomo's budget cut proposal, which called for cuts in public education funding. When I asked some of the MOM volunteers how often do they lobby, they gave me a humorous response, "Whenever necessary." Interestingly enough, Wanda gave me the same type of response when I ask her how often they lobby. Their reply answered the "why" and "how often" parts of the question. There were about twenty to thirty people on our bus as we made our way to the state capitol. In total, the organizers of this event were expecting about six hundred people from different community organizations statewide. The event before the lobbying was held in a huge auditorium near the legislative building, where the State Assembly worked. The auditorium was packed with adults, teens, elderly, and even children. Lunch was provided as government officials and constituents kept us occupied with speeches from 10 am to 1 pm. I started to notice how the morale was dying down and one MOM member, Patricia Gary, was not letting her restlessness and boredom go unnoticed.

During the pre-lobbying event, I was introduced to more information about the "Tax the Rich" campaign. Key pieces of information included the federal government,

the fact that it maintained the tax cut for rich that Bush enacted during his administration, and now the state income tax on rich is being lifted. If we kept that tax in place, that money could have been used to aid in the public school and Medicare funds. After the speeches, the MOM group was split into two; those who wanted to march with the other organizations and those who wanted to go with Wanda to lobby. I chose the latter only because I didn't know when the next time I would have the chance to meet with an assemblyperson about the budget cuts.

On the way to the legislative building, Wanda said that if the Alliance for Equality Education (AQE) did not fund the buses to this event, she didn't feel optimistic that MOM would have made an appearance. The fact that another nonprofit organization funded MOM for this trip shows how nonprofit rely on the support of others, monetarily or not. Once we made it to the building for our 2 o'clock meeting, we met with Naomi Rivera. Assemblywoman Rivera is a Hispanic woman that came from the Bronx and has know Wanda and MOM personally for a while. She talked to us in the transparent language, that many politicians use, in which she could not out rightly say what she was going to do or even how she felt about Cuomo and his proposal. Like Bloomberg has said in that Times article, Assemblywoman Naomi Rivera also stated that she was behind Cuomo. Ultimately, she told us that she has a large Jewish and Italian following in her district so she has to be sensitive primarily to their needs if she wants to get re-elected.

I have to admit, at first, I have mistaken the organizations casual demeanor for being not serious, but it turns out that they have fooled me. After being lobbying, I've realized a lot about Wanda. She is casual yet, she gets things done. It is important to be

calm and stress-free if you want others around you to operate properly and efficiently. She makes it easy for those on grassroots level to relate and communicate with her and yet, she is taken seriously by government officials. I was surprised how she knew background information about Naomi Rivera. She knew Assemblywoman Rivera's father, sister, and could even recall what part of Puerto Rico her father was born in. I appreciated how, even though Mrs. Rivera was operating on the state government level, she and Wanda exchanged words of familiarity.

Budget cuts and the negligence to tax the rich has led to the deferral of repairs in parks, highways, and even public housing. If repairs do not get fixed in a timely matter, they get worse time, and end up costing more to repair in the long run. This is relevant to the bridges, highways, and parks that need to be renovated. If we, as New Yorkers, never have the money to repair infrastructure, how will these repairs ever been made? More importantly, do we think that public infrastructure is invincible and will survive forever without maintenance? Taxes are needed, more importantly, from the rich how have received tax breaks for years, on a federal level, due to the Bush administration, and now on a local level, due to the reluctance to reinstate the tax on the rich. We are in an era in the rich are being rewarded and shielded from the realities of recession and the rest of New Yorkers, and America, has to suffer. We suffer through public program cuts, necessities, which are taken away in order for New York to be "more responsible."

Even though the Green Job Report seems promising, the current budget cuts statewide may delay the passing of this job report. Gov. Andrew Cuomo's budget cut proposal is expected to cut public programs, such as public school funding and

Medicare. Public schools and Medicare have one similarity in common; they cater to the poor. While in Albany, I was informed that alongside the federal tax cuts for the rich put in place by Bush, through the new proposal, state government tax cuts for the rich are anticipated as well; current New York legislation is biased in favor of the millionaires. A lot of the organizations that were present in Albany felt that if particular taxes were kept in place of the rich in the New York State, then the budget cuts would not have to be as drastic.

In Gov. Cuomo's final budget cut proposal, which was agreed on with the leaders of the Legislature, he managed to avoid new taxes, which is what the state could have used to reduce the public program cuts. According to New York Times, "the budget did not include an extension of a temporary income tax surcharge on wealthy New Yorkers."²¹ The combination of these factors will result in the quality of public schools to continue to deteriorate and become even more crowded than they are well as low-income NY residents receive less care than they had in the past.

It personally angers me to note how in one New York Times article, even after mentioning that the state government plans to reduce spending on education and health care, two necessities, two billion dollars year after year, it states that Cuomo and the Legislature are trying to move towards being more responsible:

²¹ Nicholas Confessore and Thomas Kaplan. "NY Budget Deal Cuts Aid to Schools and Health Care." The New York Times. 27 March 2011. 5 April 2011.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/28/nyregion/28budget.html?_r=2&scp=3&sq=cuomo%20and%20budget%20cuts&st=cse>

"Mr. Cuomo and the legislative leaders said they hoped the agreement would signal a new day of responsible budgeting and effective government in a Capitol long criticized for its gridlock and dysfunction."²²

I don't know how responsible it is to deny New York residents of good quality schools and health care based on their social position in American society. People rely on public programs, which are less expensive than private ones, to use their income in the most effective way. If I could ask Cuomo and the Legislature one question, I would ask them, "How responsible is it for a parent (the government), to make sure that one of their children is clothed, feed, and healthy, and leave the rest out in the cold, hungry, and without any protection?" That is what they are essentially doing to the working poor; reducing the budget on public programs and providing tax cuts for the rich is not responsible.

One respondent^{to} of my questionnaire feels that the expansion of MOM along with the passing of the Green Job Report does not look promising with the upcoming proposed budget cuts. Mothers on the Move is funded by other non-profits, Edna McConnell and Aaron Diamond Foundations, which may suffer in funds with the cuts. The Green Job Report requires government support and funding, NYCHA in particular, in order to be brought to life, which looks grim if budget cuts are not in favor of public programs, and essentially, the poorer New York residents. However, if the Green Job Report is deferred due to budget cuts, then it would, in effect, set MOM back in their goals.

²² Nicholas Confessore and Thomas Kaplan. "NY Budget Deal Cuts Aid to Schools and Health Care." The New York Times. 27 March 2011. 5 April 2011.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/28/nyregion/28budget.html?_r=2&scp=3&sq=cuomo%20and%20budget%20cuts&st=cse>

Taxing the Rich

MOM, along with other NY community organizations, feel that imposing taxes on the millionaires would lessen the severity of the budget cuts. Nancy Folbre is an economics professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, also believes that increased taxes for the rich would sustain public programs, in which the other 99 percent non-rich Americans rely on.²³ It would only be fair considering that the national wealth has increased over the years, and the only one benefitting from it are the rich. Even with the increased national wealth, the rest of the country, the middle class and lower class citizens aren't getting their piece of the pie; in effect, the "trickle down" effect failed. It is difficult to rectify the situation when the wealthiest citizens are the ones in power and hold the strongest political leverage.

While in Albany, I saw people who did not resemble me; rich white politicians. It is going to be difficult to get the Green Job Report passed since the people in power hold very little allegiance, if at all, to the people of the South Bronx, who are black, Latino and occupy the lowest bracket on the social ladder. The government building in Albany that housed the Assemblymen seemed impersonal; the government officials felt impersonal. It was as if we went into someone else's home and demand^{ed} something that did not belong to us. However, as American citizens, the right to quality public education does belong to us. The objective of all the organizations that came to the lobbying event was to protect our schools. The fact was the rich are getting tax breaks while the poor suffer with poor quality public programs.

Cuomo's Budget Cuts

²³ Nancy Folbre. "Taxing the Rich." The New York Times. 11 April 2011. 28 April 2011. <<http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/11/taxing-the-rich/>>.

According to the New York Times, Gov. Cuomo is still popular among most New Yorkers. After conducting a poll over the phone, over sixty percent of New Yorkers are happy with the way the Governor conducted the proposal.

*"The \$132.5 billion budget approved by lawmakers reflected almost exactly what the governor proposed two months ago, and that fact was not lost on New Yorkers. Sixty-one percent of voters described Mr. Cuomo as a winner in the annual budget battle"*²⁴

This piece of information is hard for me to believe, especially since a variety of public programs will be even more underfunded as a result. I wonder if the poll participants know that, among public programs, public infrastructures, such as parks, will not be renovated due to the cuts. The Department of Parks and Recreation budget will not be able to produce new playgrounds or renovate old parks, such as the Fort Greene Park and the Commodore Barry Park baseball field.²⁵ Everyone wants their share of New York State funds, but the budget is very limited on what matters can be catered too.

Mothers on the Move was able to gain some press and media attention towards their cause through a recent interview with the Daily News.²⁶ Nova stated in the article

²⁴ Thomas Kaplan. "Cuomo Enjoys Strong Popularity, Poll Shows." The New York Times, 11 April 2011. 28 April 2011. <<http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/11/cuomo-enjoys-strong-popularity-poll-shows/>>

²⁵

Mitchell Trinko. "Budget Cuts Could Mean Less Repairs, Dirtier Parks." The New York Times, 30 March 2011. 28 April 2011. <<http://fort-greene.thelocal.nytimes.com/2011/03/30/budget-cuts-could-mean-less-repairs-dirtier-parks/>>

²⁶ Daniel Beekman. "New report says hiring NYCHA tenants for green jobs, repairs would lower unemployment, save money." The New York Daily News.

that green jobs would be beneficial for NYCHA residents and NYCHA itself, which is experiencing a huge deficit. The Daily News, along with other local news stations and companies covered the Empowerment March on April 15th, which brought awareness to the start of the green job training pilot program being held in one of the NYCHA housing developments.

In order to understand the reality of the Green Job being put into full effect, it is important to reiterate minority political power in big cities. It is understood that a minority in office does not correlate to the needs of minority constituents being addressed. The stratification of class among minorities in combination with local politicians taking cues from the constituents who vote, it makes it more difficult for politicians to listen to the needs of the lower-class citizens. However, when community organization occurs, it becomes harder for politicians to ignore the issues. This is where MOM comes into play. MOM gets involved and gets to know public officials. Wanda knows ^{s proper} Assembly people, Ruben Diaz Sr. and Jr., who have helped MOM in the battle to close down the NYOFCO factory. Press and the aid of government officials is very essential to bringing attention to the needs of the South Bronx, which include funding for the extension of green job training programs in NYCHA housing.

This situation of low funds for public programs leads back to the role of taxes. Tax cuts translate to limited funding on public programs. In Frank's book, *Falling Behind*, he describes how taxes are important and tax cuts are not beneficial overall in the long run.²⁷ All over America, there are repairs that need to be done, old bridges and

<http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/bronx/2011/04/20/2011-04-20_new_report_says_hiring_nycha_tenants_for_green_jobs_repairs_would_lower_unemploy.html>

²⁷ Robert Frank. *Falling Behind*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Chapter 4**Conclusion: The Policy Recommendation**

To improve conditions in the South Bronx, a lot of measures need to be taken. Nova made the suggestion of putting people in office that are from the community and are properly informed of the conditions in the area. The trick is finding someone who a lot of residents know in the area and admire. Mothers on the Move has done so much: shut down NYOFCO factory on Hunt's Point, started the green job pilot program for NYCHA residents, fought for the student Metro cards, and the list goes on and on. If MOM has a credentials list that all of the above and more, then there is very little reason for them not to endorse a member of their community to hold a local government position, such as Councilman or woman.

Mothers on the Move has spoken very highly of Ruben Diaz Jr. and Sr., who both have held or are currently holding government positions. They are both Latino and have lived in the Bronx; therefore they make good representatives for the minority residents of the area. People, like Ruben Diaz Jr. and Sr., who have the "street knowledge" of what's really going on in the area in combination with the academic background of higher learning institutions would make for an ideal candidate.

The things that need to be taken into account are the push-and-pull of politics. One elects a government official that caters to their interests and the government official wants to cater to the constituents in order to be rewarded with a reelection. That's how one respondent defined her relationship with the government as well as MOM's relationship with the government. If someone who a lot of people know and trust in the community has undergone the same issues as the people, they are more likely to

understand and aid the residents. This, however, is not guaranteed, because power has a strong possibility of corrupting people.

It is difficult to say if race should be a factor in the decision to choose the candidate, because, like Browning says, electing minority officials does not guarantee that the minority constituents' interests will be met, and some MOM members can vouch for that idea. There are government officials, like Assemblywoman Naomi Rivera, who is Hispanic and yet, so does not work for the benefit of minority Bronx residents; her loyalty is primarily to her district. But, even with this knowledge, I feel that inner-city black and Latino poor are more likely to more for a minority candidate. Also, in relation to the South Bronx voters, I believe that the South Bronx voters would trust an official with a black or Latino background more than they would trust a white candidate; so, in that regard, race does matter.

Along with mobilizing South Bronx residents and residents of other area in New York City, to vote for the candidate(s) who come from similar neighborhoods, MOM should continue to be politically active. I find it interesting how Mothers on the Move still survives despite political activity. When I worked for a non-profit called Project Sunshine in the Bryant Park area, the office could not become politically active or endorse candidates, which would affect the funding received from a variety of candidates. It could be different for MOM's case because it is a grassroots organization that battles inequalities of all kinds; therefore, it would be very difficult for it to remain politically inactive. The foundations who fund Mothers on the Move do not challenge their political activism because MOM still exists today!

My main policy recommendation would be for MOM to continue pushing for the Green Job Report to be in full effect and get as many people involved as possible. The pilot program is in effect and I am curious to know how it will turn out because if all goes well, it is possible that more funding could be coming in for it. Even though this state and country has made some devastating cuts to public programs, I feel optimistic that with the network of non-profits behind you, through Rights to the City, your voices will not be ignored. A Social Revolution is on its way.

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