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# Beyond Women and Economics: Rereading "Women's Work"

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## **Beyond Women and Economics: Rereading “Women’s Work”**

**F**eminist economics is a knowledge project that works toward a feminist transformation of economics. Using gender as an analytical category, feminist economists have shown that unquestioned and unexamined masculinist values are deeply embedded in the theoretical and empirical aspects of economics. Absent feminist analyses, economics rationalizes and naturalizes existing social hierarchies based on gender, race, class, and nation. Although this is especially true of issues particularly germane to women’s lives such as the gender wage gap and the feminization of poverty, it is no less true of issues in international trade or macroeconomics. Gender analyses highlight the asymmetric effects of economic theories and policies that are hidden by conventional theorizing.

### **Dilemmas in feminist economics**

Feminist economists are faced with the same dilemmas that feminist researchers in other social sciences face: the instability of women as a category, the challenges posed by intersectionality, and the positionality of the researcher. However, the nature of feminist economics and its objects of study—such as the division of labor by gender, race, and nation; women’s position and status in labor markets; the importance of social reproduction; and the increasing disparities of wealth and income that accompany globalization—mean that feminist economists face these dilemmas in ways that are particular to their discipline.

Feminist economics is concerned with women’s economic well-being, but economic well-being often has as much to do with class as it does with gender. It studies “women’s work” but destabilizes that designation.

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It speaks for the well-being of poor women and their families but does so from positions of relative power and privilege.<sup>1</sup> It inherits the scientific prestige of economics and questions the very methodologies that accord economics its status as a science (Harding 1995; Peter 2003). Although feminist economists are highly critical of mainstream economics, most are committed to the notion of scientific inquiry. That is, they are committed to transforming economics by using gender as a category of analysis while at the same time retaining the scientific character and status of feminist economics (Barker 2004). In my experience, these commitments are motivated not only by self-interest—becoming established in the profession, attaining tenure, publishing in peer-reviewed journals—but also by a genuine desire to pursue knowledge that will materially help the lives of women, especially poor women.

An emphasis on empirical research supports these aims. Studies that disaggregate economic variables by gender or other demographic characteristics, estimate the differential effects of economic policies, infer the causes of gender and race discrimination, or impute the value of household production are numerous. These studies rely on accepted statistical methods and standards of evidence to support progressive feminist interventions in national and international economic policies. Far less attention is paid, however, to the social construction of the categories used. Statistical classifications such as race, sex, and occupation create collectivities that capture certain similarities and obscure others. These classifications do not simply reflect the natural order but rather are technologies that “supply stories about facts” (Cooper 2003, 161).

Classifications also create and reify difference. As Lisa Cosgrove has argued in the context of feminist psychological research, statistical approaches that use gender as an independent variable to describe and measure difference, combined with “the failure to address how gender is symbolized and produced, have contributed to the belief that differences between men and women are essential, universal, and ahistorical” (Cosgrove 2003, 91). Such methods essentialize gender and leave feminists with only two choices: refuting or celebrating gender differences (91). This dilemma manifests itself in feminist economics in terms of two contradictions.

First, there is a contradiction between valorizing work typically associated

<sup>1</sup> Diana Strassmann (1999), editor of the journal *Feminist Economics*, has stated that one of the most revolutionary aspects of feminist economics is its insistence on being responsive to the needs and well-being of women and their families. I assume that being able to participate in feminist economic research indicates a position of relative privilege. For an overview of the main themes in feminist economics, see Peterson and Lewis 1999.

with women such as caring for children and other sorts of domestic labor, on the one hand, and changing the role that domestic labor plays in creating and maintaining women's subordinate status, on the other hand. Second, there is a contradiction between the emancipatory potential of gender equality in the workforce and the exploitation and inequality associated with the global feminization of labor. Moving past these contradictions entails acknowledging the instability of the category "women" and analyzing the ways in which gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation mutually constitute the meanings, content, and economic valuation of the work that women do. Feminist scholarship in the poststructuralist, postmodern, and postcolonial traditions has much to offer here. This sort of inquiry is resisted by many feminist economists for two reasons: first, because poststructuralism and postmodernism, which critically examine the reciprocal connection between knowledge and power, and postcolonialism, which reveals the racism and domination in Western science, all serve to undermine the scientific status of feminist economics, and second, because focusing on differences among women seems to be antithetical to the aim of feminist economics to speak on behalf of all women.

In this article, I argue for a methodological pluralism in feminist economics that encompasses both empiricist and interpretive approaches. *Interpretivism* is a term used by feminist political scientist V. Spike Peterson to describe a postpositivist orientation that "understands language, knowledge, power as mutually constituted" (Peterson 2003, 14). Interpretive approaches call on the insights of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. These insights facilitate critical evaluations of the dialectic between power and knowledge, examine the ways in which the underlying processes of the economy are discursively constituted, and theorize the conceptual as well as the empirical aspects of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nationality.<sup>2</sup> This call for methodological pluralism does not mean that feminist economists should give up empirical work. Rather, it is to argue that interpretive approaches complement empirical work and produce knowledge that furthers the emancipatory aims of feminist economics.

### **Intellectual foundations and epistemological commitments**

Feminist economics is not a monolithic field. Its diversity stems from the fact that the intellectual groundwork was established by scholars working

<sup>2</sup> Although there are certainly significant differences among poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, and especially between postmodernism and postcolonialism, their commonalities are what interest me in this case. See Charusheela 2004 for more on the differences between postmodernism and postcolonialism.

in three different schools of economics: neoclassical economics, institutionalist economics, and Marxist political economy.<sup>3</sup> The feminism that informed their work came from two distinct schools: liberal feminism and socialist feminism. Early feminist work in the neoclassical and institutionalist traditions focused on questions about women's labor force participation, the gender wage gap, and occupational segregation (Strober 1984; Bergmann 1986; Blau and Ferber 1986). Feminist economists pointed out the distinct androcentric bias in the mainstream treatments of these issues, which explained economic differences between women and men in terms of individual choice and "natural" differences, and offered alternative explanations based on gender discrimination and other institutional considerations. This scholarship was mainly informed by the tenets of liberal feminism, particularly the notion that participation in paid labor, on equal footing with men, is necessary to women's emancipation and empowerment.

Early feminist work in the Marxist political economy tradition criticized traditional Marxist analyses of women, noting that, under patriarchy, women faced gender oppression regardless of their class status (although, of course, wealth and income accorded some women more privilege than others) or mode of production—socialist, capitalist, or feudal (Benería 1979; Hartmann 1979; Folbre 1982). Gender oppression was a result of the sexual division of labor, which under capitalism meant the division between paid and unpaid, productive and reproductive, and domestic and waged labor. I will refer to these two broad traditions as *socialist feminist economics* and *liberal feminist economics*, not to inscribe their differences but rather to highlight their similarities. As feminist economics has matured and scholars have talked and listened to one another at conferences and in journals, the distinctions between these traditions have blurred. This is not surprising, given that the objects of study for both traditions—gender, women, and women's work—are constituted empirically rather than discursively. Reproductive labor, caring labor, the feminization of the labor force, and the gender wage gap are all empirical concepts referring to material aspects of women's lives.

The empiricist epistemology shared by feminist economists in both the liberal and socialist traditions presupposes a separation between the material and the discursive in which the former refers to objects in the world and the latter to discursively constructed systems of meaning and value. The feminist economist Lourdes Benería (2003) articulates this position clearly.

<sup>3</sup> My discussion is couched in terms of the origins of Anglo-American feminist economics.

She argues that postmodern work emphasizing identity, difference, and agency has enriched our understanding of identity politics, postcolonial realities, and the intersections of gender and race. This sort of feminist work has, however, “run *parallel* to changes on the material side of life, particularly the resurgence of neoliberalism across countries and to the globalization of markets and of social and cultural life” (Benería 2003, 25; emphasis added). The problem, according to Benería, is that postmodern work tends to deemphasize the economic and generate an imbalance between the “urgent need to understand economic reality . . . and the more predominant focus on ‘words,’ including issues such as difference, subjectivity, and representation” (25). It is not that work on these issues is wrong but rather that it needs to be linked to an understanding of the socioeconomic aspects of life. Understanding the socioeconomic aspects of life is the task for feminist economics.

Benería is a highly accomplished and influential feminist economist. She is a leading authority on gender and development issues, and her reading of the relationship between the material and the discursive is widespread among feminist economists. Consider the comments of another prominent feminist economist, Julie Nelson. In an essay that discusses the range of work in feminist economics, Nelson notes the lack of deconstructionist or poststructuralist scholarship relative to that in the humanities (Nelson 2000). This is not a drawback in her opinion. Indeed, she argues that poststructuralist thought creates barriers for scholars not educated in “obscure literatures/techniques,” “promulgate[s] a bloodless and lifeless view of the world, and fail[s] to take into account lived experience” (2000, 1180). She also likens poststructuralist thought to neoclassical economics. Both, in her opinion, rely on obscure rhetoric that impedes our understanding of lived experiences.

The significant contributions of Benería, Nelson, and other members of the feminist economics community to understanding the material dimensions of women’s lives is uncontested. It is not my intention to disparage them here. Rather, my intention is to argue that analyses of identity and representation, knowledge and power, and authenticity and culture are crucial to understanding economic and political structures. My intention is to argue for a rethinking of the empiricist position and a valorizing of interpretive approaches. Since the readers of this journal are no doubt familiar with these approaches, I will not go into them in any detail here. Instead, I will briefly summarize a few salient points and then in the next section show specifically how interpretivist approaches can enrich feminist economic thought.

### **An interpretive approach**

An interpretive approach to feminist economics and feminist political economy would, at a minimum, entail a commitment to the notion that the material and discursive are not radically separate. The feminist economist Gillian Hewitson puts it clearly. She argues for a rejection of an empiricist view of language in favor of one that sees language as a system of relationships within which meaning is produced (Hewitson 1999). Metaphors are not just descriptive, they are constitutive, and a referential view of language masks these constitutive effects. For economics, including feminist economics, this means that underlying processes of the economy are constituted through economic discourse (Escobar 1994; Amariglio and Ruccio 2001; Bergeron 2004).

The concept of discourse refers not only to language but also to social institutions and practices. Since power constitutes and legitimates itself through a variety of institutions and discursive practices, an interpretive approach interrogates knowledge production as “power laden and power producing” (Peterson 2003, 24). This is crucially important for the feminist economics project because an explicit consideration of power is necessary if we are to understand the enormous disparity between the social, cultural, and political authority enjoyed by mainstream economics and the manifest failings of economics as a science. This is a specific variant of the question posed by Michel Foucault (1980): how to account for the disparity between the social authority of the human sciences and the fact that their theories are only tenuously grounded in successful scientific standards.<sup>4</sup> Considering the relationship between knowledge and power is a way to emancipate ourselves from the subjugation of science and to create alternative knowledges that are capable of opposition to and struggle against the coercion of a unified, formal, and scientific discourse (Foucault 1980). Again, this is not to argue against empirical investigations, systematic inquiry, or comparative studies (Peterson 2003). Rather, it is to argue for recognition of the contingent and local nature of such claims and to explicitly acknowledge the situated position of feminist economists, who are positioned simultaneously inside and outside of economic discourse.

Feminist economists are embedded in a network of power relations by virtue of their connection to economics (Barker, forthcoming). The discursive power of economics is not to be underestimated. Economics, particularly neoclassical economics (the type of analyses taught in most undergraduate economics courses, extolled in publications such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, and lauded by national and inter-

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Linda Martín Alcoff (1996) for this interpretation of Foucault.

national politicians and policy makers), is widely considered to be objective, gender neutral, and value free. Its pronouncements are couched in the same terms as natural laws, and the “laws of supply and demand” are accorded the same status as the law of gravity. The scientific status of economics depends crucially on its methods of inquiry: methodological individualism, rational choice theory, and mathematical modeling.

Feminist economists have had only limited success in challenging the hegemony and prestige of neoclassical economics. We are not alone here. Marxists, institutionalists, post-Keynesians, and economists of other heterodox schools have likewise had little success in this endeavor. It could be the case that no amount of “better” science and analysis will ever replace the pseudoscience that characterizes neoclassical economics—because neoclassical economics does one thing very, very well: it articulates the ideology of contemporary capitalism in a manner that makes it seem natural, inevitable, and beneficent. It does not “speak truth to power” but, on the contrary, accommodates and naturalizes power.<sup>5</sup> Interpretive approaches help us remember that the elite status and hegemonic influence of economics stem not from its superior fidelity to the real but rather from its connection to power.

My last point has to do with readings of feminism. For interpretive approaches, gender is both a conceptual and an empirical category. In Sandra Harding’s formulation, gender is a property of individuals, of social structures and institutions, and of symbolic/conceptual systems (Harding 1986). Empiricist approaches are concerned mainly with the first two properties. As an empirical category, gender emanates from differences in male and female bodies. Gender analyses explore the relationships between women and men in terms of the gender division of labor (who does which jobs), the gendered distribution of resources (who has what), and the gendered impact of new resources coming into the system (who will get what).<sup>6</sup> While these are important questions—and while they support significant interventions in policy making, especially in the context of

<sup>5</sup> Neoclassical economics assumes that the existing distribution of income and wealth, regardless of how unequal or unfair, is the result of the choices of rational individuals whose preferences are expressed through competitive markets. Market forces are akin to physical forces in this analysis, and state intervention to ameliorate inequities in competitive markets is always undertaken at the expense of economic efficiency. The processes of colonization, coercion, or other forms of class exploitation have no place because the individual is the primary unit of analysis. For further discussion, see Dobb 1937; Barker 1995; Barker and Feiner 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Cloud, e-mail message to iaffe-l, a Listserv devoted to feminist economics, September 13, 2003.



economic development—they may be complemented by a consideration of gender as a property of symbolic and conceptual systems.

Interpretive approaches illuminate the relationship between the conceptual and empirical aspects of gender. As Eudine V. Barriteau (forthcoming) puts it, the material and ideological relations of gender are both relations of power: the former concerning the relative access to resources by women and men, the latter concerning the social meanings of masculinity and femininity. Dismantling gender inequality requires a consideration of both. Moreover, as Peterson argues, feminism is not only about empowering women but also involves a “transformative critique of hierarchies that are linked and ideologically ‘naturalized’ by denigration of the feminine” (Peterson 2003, 28). Gender casts the subordinate—women as well as economically, racially, and culturally marginalized men—as “other” and naturalizes hierarchy and domination. It is important to stress here that Peterson is not arguing that gender oppression is the root of all other oppressions. Rather, she is arguing that denigration of the feminine naturalizes domination and “*produces even as it obscures vast inequalities of power, authority and resource distribution*” (2003, 28).<sup>7</sup>

Finally, one might argue that, given the problematic historical relationship between feminism and colonialism, interpretive approaches are necessary for the feminist economics project.<sup>8</sup> As S. Charusheela and Eiman O. Zein-Elabdin (2004) have argued, there are historical and theoretical grounds for solidarity between Western women and formerly colonized people. Such solidarity cannot, however, rest on the foundation of some common oppression such as “women’s work,” since the content and meaning of that category are so varied (Hirshman 1995; hooks 2000).

### **From reproductive labor to caring labor**

Gender analyses of women’s work are central to feminist economics. The functioning of any economy requires both productive labor—the paid labor that produces goods and services such as food, clothing, and shelter for sale in the market—and reproductive labor—cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, partners, the infirm, and the elderly. The productive/reproductive

<sup>7</sup> While there may be nuanced disagreements over Peterson’s articulation of the centrality of gender, the movement from the purely empirical to the conceptual remains a shared commitment.

<sup>8</sup> During the nineteenth century, feminism was used as a tool in the colonial enterprise. Colonized women were represented as victims of their own cultures, and freeing them from oppression was part of the moral rationale for colonialism (Apffel-Marglin and Simon 1994).

dichotomy has its roots in the industrial revolution, a time when factory production increasingly replaced much of household production. Gender ideology assigned men to the public sphere of the market and women to the private sphere of the family (Jennings 1993). Over time, the household came to be seen as a site of consumption rather than production, and the activities performed in the household, what we now call reproductive labor, were classified as economically unproductive (Folbre 1991). A family structure in which men were the breadwinners and women the caretakers came to be the ideal. In practice, this ideal primarily described the lives of relatively affluent families. Poor women and working-class women had to engage in income-generating activities in both the formal and informal sectors (Folbre 1991; Figart, Mutari, and Power 2002).

The ideology of the male breadwinner/female caretaker family structure helps to explain why the increase in women's labor force participation, which was well underway by the 1960s, engendered so much interest among both feminist and mainstream economists. For liberal feminist economists, the emphasis was on explaining differences in labor market outcomes between women and men and on examining how the unequal distribution of household responsibilities affects those outcomes. For socialist feminist economists, the emphasis was on analyzing the particular ways in which women were exploited by their unpaid reproductive labor in the household and on the economic significance of reproductive labor. Like liberal feminist economists, they saw women's subordinate status in paid labor markets as stemming from their primary role in unpaid household labor. The difference in the two traditions was in their understanding of the significance of reproductive labor.

Liberal feminist economists in the tradition of Ester Boserup did not treat reproductive labor as analytically separate from productive labor. Boserup (1970), whose work examined the pernicious effects of economic development on women, argued that, if women are to be economically independent, they must fully participate in a modern industrial economy. She saw the spread of capitalism as a basically liberating force for women, since she believed that the expansion of wage labor and the commodification of food, clothing, health, and education would free women from drudgery and domestic subordination (Barker and Feiner 2004). Barbara Bergmann, a contemporary feminist economist in the liberal tradition, takes a similar position. She argues that women's equality requires that they participate in the paid economy in the same way that men do and that the household labor traditionally assigned to women be commodified and either purchased from business enterprises or provided by the state

(Bergmann 1986, 1998).<sup>9</sup> Bergmann's position is aptly summarized in the title of her 1998 article, "The Only Ticket to Equality: Total Androgyny, Male Style."

In the socialist tradition in feminist economics, reproductive labor is analytically distinct from productive labor. Its significance as an analytical category emerged out of what came to be called the domestic labor debates (Molyneux 1979; Himmelweit 1999). Socialist feminist economists, interested as they were in uncovering the material basis of women's oppression, articulated the important but clearly overlooked point that the unpaid work performed in the household was necessary for social reproduction. Among the questions the debate touched on were the following: In what sense is housework work? Are housewives exploited? Who benefits from that exploitation, husbands or capitalists? What is the relationship between capitalism and domestic labor (Jefferson and King 2001)? A point of agreement that emerged from the debates is that women's primary involvement in household activities is key to understanding their subordinate role in the economy and that ameliorating women's secondary status in paid labor markets requires that "domestic work must be shared between women and men" (Benería and Sen 1981, 294).

Another point of agreement that emerged from these discussions is that not all types of reproductive labor are amenable to the same analysis. Although it may seem appropriate to commodify many things formerly produced in the household, other things such as child care, elder care, and caring for the emotional needs of family, friends, and colleagues are not amenable to complete commodification. Whether paid or unpaid, the quality of care received depends in part on the quality of the relationships connecting the givers and the receivers of care. Reproductive labor that involves caring for others is now analyzed as *caring labor*.<sup>10</sup>

Feminist economists today spend considerable time analyzing the significance of reproductive labor and caring labor and incorporating them into economic theory and policy. A few examples should suffice: Efforts to impute a monetary value to unpaid household labor (Benería 1992; Cloud and Garrett 1996) are well underway. Examinations of the impacts of neoliberal welfare state policies on the provision of caring labor and studies of the economic costs to women, who bear most of the burden of care, are now central to most progressive policy analyses in the United

<sup>9</sup> The problems associated with low pay and exploitation would be mitigated as women and men became more equal, or they should be addressed by corrective labor policies.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of this literature, see Folbre 1995; England and Folbre 1999; Daly 2001; Standing 2001; Himmelweit 2003; Jochimsen 2003.

States and Europe.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, feminist economists have demonstrated that the failure to account for the value of reproductive labor results in an underestimation of the real social costs of structural adjustment policies (Elson 1991; Grown, Elson, and Cagatay 2000). Feminists also examine the ethical and material implications of the increased migration of women from poorer countries to richer ones to work as maids, nannies, and cleaners.<sup>12</sup> One generalization that emerges over and over again is that, when this work is unpaid and done in the home, women do the vast majority of it. When done for pay, either in private homes or public workplaces, either provided for by the state or purchased privately, the work is feminized—poorly paid, insecure, and low status—regardless of the sex of the people actually doing it (Barker and Feiner 2004).

The social construction of gender is, of course, central to these analyses. The link between women and reproductive labor/caring labor is explained not by women's biological propensities but rather by a social construction of gender that assigns certain tasks and responsibilities to women and others to men. In both socialist and liberal feminist perspectives, then, sex is biological while gender is social. The liberal interpretation sees gender differences diminishing as women participate equally with men in the public sphere; in the socialist interpretation, gender differences diminish as men share the burden of caring labor and other forms of unpaid household labor with women. Unfortunately, this has not happened. Despite several decades of women's increased participation in the labor force, and an equally long period of feminist praxis, little progress has been made in renegotiating the gender division of labor within the household (Bittman 1999; Bianchi 2000). Similarly, there are still considerable obstacles in the way of ensuring an adequate and equitable supply of caring services through either the market or the state (Daly 2001).

Statistical studies are invaluable in measuring both the burden of care work and its economic and social value. In demonstrating the importance of this work for the economy, they provide a powerful tool for feminist interventions in policy making at the highest levels. By themselves, however, they cannot interrogate the ideological dynamics behind the marginalization of caring activities in contemporary industrial/postindustrial economies. Consider, for example, a study of paid caring work by Paula England and Nancy Folbre (1999) that shows that people working in caring occupations earn less than they would in other occupations re-

<sup>11</sup> See Sainsbury 1999; Daly 2001; Folbre 2001; Albelda 2002.

<sup>12</sup> For an overview of this literature, see Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Pyle 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Peterson 2003.

quiring the same level of skill, experience, education, and so forth. They hypothesize five reasons for the relatively low remuneration for caring work: the association of care with women and mothering, the possible intrinsic rewards associated with caring, the failure of markets to capture full social benefits of care, the political failure of the state to adequately compensate caregivers, and the belief that commodification will hurt the quality of care. Interpretive approaches can flesh out these reasons by exploring how dominant ideologies—particularly those associated with the male breadwinner/female caregiver model of the family—shape both the ideological construction and the social organization of caring labor.

The poststructuralist rereading of the distinction between sex and gender by feminist economist Gillian Hewitson (1999, 2003) provides an important starting place for these explorations. Biological difference between the sexes is the basis for the social differentiation between masculine and feminine genders, so that, in general, gender socialization “allocates feminine traits to females and male traits to males” (Hewitson 1999, 110). In this scenario, caring is a female trait because normal feminine identity is one believed to be naturally endowed with both the capacity and the desire to care for others. Normal masculine identity, on the other hand, is understood to be lacking these capacities. Feminists who leave the sex/gender dichotomy in place are then faced with the question of whether women should be socialized like men or whether women are in fact naturally different from men. In other words, the equality/difference dichotomy is left intact.

If, as in the liberal tradition, gender equality requires that women become more like men, then women must fit into a set of structures and meanings that are organized around male bodies. They are the ones who must deny their sexual specificity (Sullivan 1990, 184). If, as in the socialist tradition, valorizing care requires a reorganization of the gender division of labor, then the problem is with the assumption that the sexual division of labor creates gender difference.<sup>13</sup> In both cases it is the notion that sexual difference is prior to gender difference that creates the impasse. If, however, we adopt a poststructuralist approach in which the real is constituted as meaningful through representations, then we open a space for theorizing sexual difference and sexed bodies. This space allows us to deconstruct the link between women and care and to theorize other embodied differences (Hewitson 2003).

Hewitson (2003) argues that sex/gender behaviors and practices are

<sup>13</sup> For further discussion of how the sexual division of labor creates gender difference, see Amott and Matthaai 1996.

understood very differently when they are displayed by women rather than men. I argue that they are also understood differently according to differences in race, class, sexuality, and nation. Cultural attitudes toward parenting practices in the United States provide the perfect example. When an impoverished African American woman quits her job to care for her young children, social policy represents her as a lazy parasite on the social body. Her labor, rearing her children, has little or no value (Thomas 1998). When an affluent white woman does the same thing, she is extolled as a “good mother.” When poor Black, Latina, or Filipina women are paid to care for the children of the affluent, this labor is suddenly valorized. The difference lies not in the nature of the work but rather in the representations of the laboring bodies. Thus, theorizing discursive constructions of embodied difference is necessary rather than detrimental to the feminist economic project.

#### **Out of the kitchen and into the global assembly line**

A cornerstone of liberal feminism is that gender equality requires that women participate in the public sphere—economically, politically, and culturally—on an equal footing with men. So, in a modern industrial/postindustrial economy, women’s subordinate position in, or systematic exclusion from, paid labor markets is causally linked to their subordinate status in families, education, politics, and so forth. Charusheela puts the point clearly: “Employment provides women with the financial independence needed for autonomy and freedom. . . . Further, by entering the world of work women gain public recognition and status for their achievements, thus increasing the overall status of women within the home and in the broader society” (2003, 288).

This position is ubiquitous among economists of all stripes as well as among national and international policy makers. What has become particularly interesting in recent discourse is that gender equality is talked about not only in terms of its benefits for women qua women but also in terms of its contribution to the greater social good. For example, Amartya Sen, Nobel laureate in economics, argues that women’s empowerment through schooling, employment opportunities, and so on reduces child mortality, improves public health, and moderates the growth in fertility rates (Kapur 1999). Similarly, the World Bank has issued a comprehensive report titled *Engendering Development: Through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources, and Voice* (2001) premised on the notion that gender equality is key to promoting economic development and fighting poverty. Ignoring gender disparities not only harms women and girls but also “comes at a great cost—

to people's well-being and to countries' abilities to grow sustainably, to govern effectively, and thus to reduce poverty" (World Bank 2001, xi). Of course, one key to eliminating gender inequality or empowering women (the terms *gender equality* and *empowering women* are used interchangeably in the report) is to encourage women's participation in the paid labor force.<sup>14</sup>

It is certainly true that women should have the same access to independent incomes that men do, and in a monetized economy paid employment is crucially important to women's well-being. But as feminist scholars, being in positions of relative power and privilege, we need to look on this sudden convergence of feminist interests with the interests of global capitalism with a critical eye lest history cast us in the same light as it has the nineteenth-century feminists who were complicit in providing the ethical rationale for European colonial ventures. Our complicity would be in advancing the global feminization of labor.

Old-fashioned colonialism has been replaced by globalization. A prominent feature of globalization is the adoption of export-led growth development strategies by developing countries. These strategies rely on a large pool of labor willing to work at monotonous jobs for very low wages. In practice, this requires a significant number of women willing to work for low wages at monotonous tasks; hence, the global feminization of labor. Able and dedicated feminist scholars have explored this phenomenon and worked toward the inclusion of gender analyses at the highest levels of policy making.<sup>15</sup> This is, however, a case where feminist economics must go beyond women and economics because it can be argued that globalization entails a conversion of all labor to the conditions of female labor (Pearson 1998; Standing 1999). As globalization continues its inexorable path, the global economy promises jobs that are more insecure, more flexible (for the employer, not the employees), and even more poorly paid. As Guy Standing (1999) notes, the proportion of jobs requiring craft skills acquired through apprenticeship has declined; labor market regulations have been eroded; and unionized, full-time, stable jobs are disappearing. Large numbers of men join the ranks of women working as low-wage employees lacking job security and engaging in work that

<sup>14</sup> This does not preclude other strategic considerations to women's empowerment, such as increasing women's access to land rights and ownership as well as to financial resources. The work of Bina Agarwal (1995) has been influential on the former.

<sup>15</sup> For an overview of this literature in economics and political economy, see Elson 1991; Jackson and Pearson 1998; Peterson and Runyan 1999; Benería et al. 2000; Enloe 2000; Grown, Elson, and Cagatay 2000; Pyle 2001; Benería 2003; Barker and Feiner 2004, chap. 6.

requires little training—from running the cash registers at Wal-Mart to staffing the production lines in textile and electronics factories.

What can an interpretive approach add to this discussion? First, it can problematize the public/private dualism that pervades liberal feminist thought. No longer can the public sphere be regarded as a site of autonomy, freedom, and reason, privileged over the private sphere of connection, obligation, and emotion. Second, it can facilitate an examination of the ways in which feminist economic knowledge authorizes specific interventions that privilege some women (and men) while subordinating others. Entering the world of paid work can no longer be regarded as necessarily contributing to women's empowerment. And, of course, it never really could, as consideration of the experiences of poor women who have worked in the homes, factories, and fields of the wealthy shows.

The world of work is not a homogeneous place. As Charusheela (2003) has argued, the notion that paid work results in autonomy, self-realization, and choice is a culturally specific understanding of work that reflects the experiences of relatively privileged women. Paid work has a different meaning for the descendants of slaves, for displaced peasants, for immigrants, and for others at the bottom of the labor market. Rather than being liberating, work for these people is often "demeaning, undignified, and oppressive" (Charusheela 2003, 298). Ethnic minority women in the West enter the labor force as nannies, maids, and sex workers. They end up in these occupations because they are barred from competing for other jobs and tracked into doing the jobs that no one else wishes to do, and one product of their labor is leisure for upper-class women. For example, Jim Crow laws in the American South, combined with the force of social prejudice, relegated African American women to domestic work and agricultural work until the 1960s (Amott and Matthaei 1996). Today national immigration laws and occupational licensing requirements ensure that many migrant workers are similarly confined in their employment opportunities.

As relatively affluent women enter the paid labor market, they must use some of their income to purchase the reproductive goods and services not produced in the home. Charusheela (2003) points out that these things are often provided by women (and some men) from minority, working-class, or third-world immigrant backgrounds. The race-class structures of wages and jobs keep the costs of purchasing these goods and services low. So the empowerment of some women is made possible by the cheap labor supplied by their less fortunate sisters and brothers: "Ethnic-minority, working-class women provide the cheap services of nan-



nies, maids, and domestics within the home that allow other women to leave the home and enter the empowering world of work” (Charusheela 2003, 294).

Likewise, I would add, the labor of poor women working in the global assembly line—in textile mills, electronics assembly plants, and toy factories—is necessary for the participation of women, both poor and affluent, in the paid labor force. As Susan Himmelweit (1995) has argued, more and more of the needs and desires of workers and their families are being constructed in a form that has to be met through mass-produced consumer goods, and this further embeds the satisfaction of human needs within the logic of the market. The logic of the market is a logic of opportunity and choice for the privileged few and a logic of inequality and exploitation for the rest.

### **Concluding remarks**

The confluence of representations and material conditions in a particular society at a particular point in time defines some work as women’s and other work as men’s. Likewise, some work is considered suitable for marginalized groups while other work—the more pleasant, rewarding sort of work—is reserved for the culturally dominant group (Barker and Feiner 2004). Such symbolic and material associations are largely, but not wholly, an effect of culture, ideology, and other discursive practices. Interpretive approaches add to feminist economic analyses of work because they are able to bridge the discursive and the material. Moreover, deconstructing the category “women” enables us to speak on behalf of women because doing so forces us to consider explicitly the multiple and conflicting intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation.

This does not mean that all feminist economists must change their research methodologies. The master’s tools may be quite useful in dismantling the master’s house, but, if we are to use them, we need to interrogate the problematic epistemological and ontological assumptions in which they are grounded (Cosgrove 2003). I am advocating a methodological pluralism that will bridge the chasm between materialist and discursive perspectives. Recognizing the constitutive links between representations and the real and between power and knowledge and using gender as a conceptual rather than an empirical category are both strategies that will further the feminist economics project.

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