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No Abstract

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Postcolonial readings of unpaid domestic labor and development

Cynthia A. Wood

In this essay, I explore the implications of postcolonial feminist thought for analyses of mainstream economics' marginalization of unpaid domestic labor, or housework. Through close readings of theories of economic development, I consider the following questions: Do "third-world" contexts force development economists to recognize the existence of women's work which is ignored in economic analyses of the North?¹ If so, does this imply the incorporation of unpaid domestic labor? Are there differences in the unpaid domestic labor of women in the South and those in "developed" countries which are relevant to this discussion? How do "first-world" experiences shape definitions of economic activity? What are the implications of all of this for the material lives of women currently subjected to "development"?

I argue that the existence of different forms of nonmarket work in "less developed" countries complicates mechanisms of marginalizing unpaid domestic labor in development economics. This analysis deconstructs foundational assumptions of economics to show how they reproduce and reinforce postcolonial systems of power, to the particular detriment of many women in the South. It is premised on the belief that what appears on the margins is often most revealing of a discourse and most productive of new directions. Slips of the tongue, things seen peripherally, unexpected metaphors or absences can guide us to the rifts or seams of a discourse and be used to pry it apart. These marginalia are the traces of the obscuring and obscured in economics, good reasons to look at unpaid domestic labor and the "third world" together.

Such an approach is vital to understanding the material effects of development on women in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The huge development industry which has emerged over the last fifty years applies policy in these regions based on hegemonic theories of economic development. Such theories marginalize the experiences of women generally and those of Southern women in particular. People being "developed" have little input into development policy, and often no choice in whether or not it is applied, despite extraordinary as well as everyday forms of resistance which constantly challenge mainstream development in the field(s).² Women often lose even more than men in this scenario.

While feminist economists have devoted considerable and sophisticated attention to the theoretical exclusion of unpaid domestic and caring labor from mainstream economics, they have generally done so without taking into account differences between women in the North and South (e.g. see Folbre 1995; Himmelweit 1995, 1999; Woolley 1999; Nelson 1999; Jefferson and King 2001). Even those who discuss third-world women's unpaid work do not necessarily recognize the implications of these differences for conceptualizations of domesticity, care, and labor, or for policies deriving from these conceptualizations when applied to the South (e.g. see Folbre 1986, 1994; Akram-Lodhi 1996; Floro 1999).³

Not looking at differences results in unintended "first-world" bias in feminist economic analysis of unpaid domestic labor.⁴ For example, stating that time-use trade-offs for work are between wage-labor and unpaid domestic labor ignores other possibilities that might be relevant in some areas of the South, such as unpaid subsistence farming or care for small animals (see Himmelweit 1995). Similarly, saying that unpaid domestic labor consists of activities such as "cleaning, cooking, and childcare" does not appear to define these activities in terms of first-world experience. However, it elides important differences in conditions of work which will not be considered by Northern audiences unless their attention is drawn to them explicitly; cleaning a house with open windows and a dirt floor in southern India is very different (both qualitatively and quantitatively) from doing so in an urban apartment in the U.S.⁵

Related to the problem of first-world bias in conceptualizations of unpaid domestic labor is that of homogenizing the experiences of women in places other than the North. This is particularly an issue in the context of development, which gives little attention to differences in the regions subjected to it. This essay concentrates on first-world bias and highlights differences in the unpaid domestic labor of "North" and "South," which poses the danger of homogenizing women across each of these problematic categories. In part, this problem emerges from material conditions; some women are at the receiving end of development, others are not, and this is something that unifies them despite their diversity. But I am also working with conceptualizations within economics which depend upon opposing categories of North and South. I use these categories only in hopes of disrupting them. There is also a dearth of empirical data on differences in women's unpaid work across the South, largely due to the conceptual biases I discuss. Where possible, I attempt to call attention to these differences and suggest the implications of varieties of unpaid domestic labor for economic theory.

If feminist economics is not to contribute to the marginalization and homogenization of Southern women's experiences it must incorporate the insights of postcolonial theory and pay attention to these economic marginalia. My discussion of the treatment of unpaid domestic labor and other nonmarket production

in development economics serves in part to reinforce feminist analysis of the marginalization of such labor in mainstream theory generally. But it also illuminates the postcolonial face of that marginalization, as assumptions about economic progress and definitions of economic activity are revealed in the hinterlands to be gendered constructions constituted through first-world experiences and interests, which do special harm to women in the South.

Reading development and the market

Much feminist work has shown that the market is privileged in mainstream economic theory and that this results in the marginalization of unpaid domestic labor (Himmelweit 1995; Waring 1988; Wood 1997). Development economics is no exception to this generalization.⁶ Economists of the early postwar period, such as P.N. Rosenstein-Rodan, Ragnar Nurkse, Walt Rostow, and W. Arthur Lewis, focused on how to bring about market growth in less developed countries through government-directed investments in physical capital (Bruton 1958: 219; Arndt 1981: 465; Myrdal 1981: 507; Meier 1984: 6). Most of these economists did not discuss nonmarket economic activity at all; a few discussed it in terms which marginalized it. This absence of attention is striking given the importance of subsistence agriculture in economies defined as "underdeveloped" largely due to small and inadequate markets (see Rosenstein-Rodan 1958: 245; Nurkse 1958: 257).

It is so striking that it alerts us to look more closely and to ask some questions at/from/of the margins. What is the function of inattention to nonmarket economic activity in postwar contexts of globalizing corporate capitalism? Whose interests are served by its marginalization, when "development" is constituted by gendered processes and institutions, as it must be? Postcolonial feminist theory suggests that this marginalization is neither coincidental nor inconsequential to understanding development economics. Since noncommodity production is most important in economies of the South, and is dominated by poor folk of all genders and by women from various classes, its marginalization serves to (re)enforce "first-world" as well as male bias in development economics.

It is perhaps obvious to say at this point that the North is the model for economic progress in development economics, which assumes that the third world "develops" to the degree that it becomes like the "first world." Yet the connotations of this are subtle and inextricably implicated in postcolonial systems of domination. It is not just that economies of the South must come to have markets, for example, but that they must have the same or similar markets as those in the North. In some cases they must come to have them in the same way that the North did or does. None of this is gender-neutral, though it may appear to be so. As Catherine Scott points out, the view of modernization which underlies such a conception of development is situated "in opposition to a feminized and traditional household" (Scott 1995: 5).

In the early postwar period this is most evident in W. Arthur Lewis's dual economy model, which recognized the "traditional" nonmarket sector as economic, but only to better understand how and why to eliminate it. Lewis argued that many workers in underdeveloped economies have a marginal productivity of labor equal to zero: farmers, casual workers, petty traders in the informal economy, "retainers" such as domestic servants, and women in the household. The movement of surplus labor from this "subsistence sector" to the "capitalist" sector of the formal market would automatically bring about an increase in productivity and therefore growth (Lewis 1958: 402–6). Acknowledging the subsistence sector as economic, he simultaneously defines it as "less" economic than the formal market sector: "what one gets are very heavily developed patches of the economy, surrounded by economic darkness" (*ibid.*: 409).

Lewis's understanding of the subsistence economy includes women's unpaid domestic work such as "grinding grain, fetching water from the river, making clothes, cooking the midday meal, teaching children, nursing the sick, etc." (*ibid.*: 404; see also Elson 1999: 96–7). But, like all economic activities, this work could be performed better in the market sector. According to Lewis, "the transfer of women's work from the household to commercial employment is one of the most notable features of economic development" (Lewis 1958: 404). Women's economic activity, both paid and unpaid, is relegated to the margins by Lewis's analysis. In the "economic darkness" which surrounds the capitalist sector is an economy dominated by women, working in subsistence farming, in the informal economy, in domestic service, and in the household.⁷

The marginalization of noncommodity production in development economics carries with it that of unpaid domestic labor. The primary mechanism of marginalization is the privileging of the market, which confirms an important aspect of feminist analysis of the exclusion of unpaid domestic labor in mainstream economics. However, the postcolonial context is not dispensable to this analysis. Incorporating the various experiences of women of the South requires more than adding third-world examples; the conceptual apparatus must begin with awareness of difference among and between women of different regions, cultures, and classes. Analyzing definitions of economic activity in the context of development provides further insight on this point. What is meant (and not meant) by work, production, and economic activity is shaped by gender, but always in a postcolonial frame.

Defining economic activity

While the commoditized aspects of Lewis's subsistence economy can be readily identified as economic within development economics, the noncommodity sector is more difficult. Some nonmonetary definition of economic activity must be constructed to distinguish the large (if inferior) nonmarket economy from those

activities considered noneconomic. As in models of household production, a "third-party criterion" is generally used to make this distinction in development models which acknowledge the existence of nonmarket economic activity. According to this criterion, if an activity or its product could be performed by a third party and sold on the market, then that activity is economic. This definition is not neutral. Considering the third-party criterion in the light of postcolonial feminist theory reveals "first-world" as well as masculinist biases which have serious consequences for women in the South.

I have argued elsewhere that there are two problems with the third-party criterion from a feminist perspective, one theoretical and one practical (Wood 1997). The theoretical problem is that by setting the market as the defining standard for economic activity, this criterion affirms its privileged position in economic analysis and thereby marginalizes all forms of noncommodity production. The means of inclusion thus serves to reinforce the marginality of unpaid domestic labor. The practical difficulty is that the third-party criterion is applied inconsistently, so that much unpaid domestic labor is excluded from definitions of economic activity even when it is marketable. Childcare, cooking, and cleaning house, regardless of the conditions under which they are performed, are officially excluded from the UN System of National Accounts (Wood 1997: 57–8; see also Waring 1988; Benería 1992).

How does postcolonial theory complicate this analysis? A closer look at the Lewis model reveals an implicit first-world bias that is reproduced in development theory and policy generally. As examples of women's household work, Lewis lists activities which in the North are generally or often performed on or for the market ("grinding grain, fetching water from the river, making clothes, cooking the midday meal, teaching children, nursing the sick, etc.") (Lewis 1958: 404). Household activities which make up the majority of unpaid domestic labor in the North, such as cleaning house, basic childcare, and cooking the evening meal, are not listed.

This is a subtle distinction, but one which reveals how Northern experience shapes the apparently neutral third-party criterion. Aspects of women's unpaid domestic labor in the South which resemble household work performed by women in the North are excluded from Lewis's and other development practitioners' implicit definition of economic activity, occupying the deepest shadows beyond even the economic darkness which Lewis suggests will be eliminated with development.⁸ But those aspects of Southern women's unpaid domestic labor which would be handled on the market in the North should, at least in theory, be counted and addressed in development economics. There is thus not only a third-party but also a "first-world" criterion underlying this definition (Wood 1997: 59–63).

This "first-world/third-party" criterion is implicit in much development economics after Lewis, and is endemic to development policy focusing on

women. Such policy generally includes education, family planning, and the enhancement of women's earning capabilities as major objectives. But the provision of wells and alternative sources of fuel to end the need to carry water long distances or collect firewood are among the most common project goals supported by development agencies (see Leonard 1989; Tinker 1990: 35–44). Unpaid domestic labor such as childcare or cleaning house is rarely included in policy design or evaluation.

What is the problem with the first-world/third-party criterion for women in the South? At first glance it seems to be the same as that which other feminist economists have criticized (e.g. Folbre 1994; Himmelweit 1995). The exclusion of unpaid domestic labor affects what development economics defines as the legitimate terrain of analysis. Childcare or cleaning house, even when performed under very poor conditions, are not signs of an economy's underdevelopment. Consequently, this work will not be addressed in development theory or policy, except possibly as instrumental to some other (market) goal. This is so despite extensive feminist analysis which shows that understanding unpaid domestic labor is fundamental to improving women's lives (see Benería and Sen 1981; Elson 1989; Leonard 1989; UNDP 1995; UNIFEM 2000). The important point that poor conditions make such labor more difficult for many women in the South does not alter this basic feminist critique, except as a matter of degree.

However, a postcolonial perspective demands attention to difference. Even within the context of feminist critiques of the marginalization of unpaid domestic labor and the negative consequences of this marginalization for women it is likely that differences in such labor across the world matter enough to require re-evaluation of a theory built from first-world women's experience. Are what we lump together as childcare or housework really the same activities when performed under radically different conditions of work, in diverse social and economic contexts? Do not the daily realities of high infant and child mortality in Northeastern Brazil and Sub-Saharan Africa or common traditions of child fostering in the Andes require us to re-evaluate conceptualizations of "childcare" (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Weismantel 2001)? What do chickens in a home with an open door do to our understanding of "cleaning house," which implicitly derives from first-world experiences? These questions should lead to a reassessment of feminist economic analysis of unpaid domestic labor.

Remember also that the first-world/third-party criterion only marginalizes those aspects of Southern women's unpaid domestic labor which look like such labor as performed in the North. Consequently, not only does it define economic activity in market terms, and thereby exclude a certain type of unpaid domestic labor from economic analysis, but it also sets the first world as the norm or standard for defining such activity. By doing so it reinscribes models of development which drive all the various regions and cultures of the South to become as much like the North as possible without interfering with

postcolonial systems of domination. For women across the South, this means that the same development policies which disregard various important and time-consuming aspects of their unpaid childcare, housecleaning, and cooking also look at other components of their unpaid domestic labor ("grinding grain, fetching water from the river, making clothes, cooking the midday meal, teaching children, nursing the sick, etc.") as something to be eliminated or transformed so that their lives mirror those of women in the North.

The effect of this bias on women in the South is difficult to evaluate. On the one hand, hauling water and collecting wood is onerous work, and women who have to do it are happy to get rid of it. On the other hand, in the context of development as currently theorized and practiced this work can only be gotten rid of in particular ways, and the process is necessarily accompanied by other first-world baggage. Women who would like to have running water might not be so happy to find themselves in isolated households, without the shared labor, companionship, and support of extended family, for example, but if the purpose of development is to produce a homogeneous South that looks like a (subordinate) North they get the whole package, willy-nilly. The implications of this for women will depend on the differing social, economic, and cultural contexts in which they live.

Social development and basic needs

Development economists in the late 1960s and 1970s concentrated on "social" objectives such as the redistribution of income, the eradication of absolute poverty, and the provision of basic needs (see Arndt 1987: 89–113). Arguing for the dethronement of gross national product (GNP) as the primary focus of development, these economists also called attention to the importance of nonmarket activity (e.g. Chenery *et al.* 1974: xv, 4, 245, 247). However, achieving social goals was not identical to economic development, which continued to be understood in market terms (*ibid.*: 47, 245). "Social development" thus contributed to the marginalization of unpaid domestic labor just as in other theories of economic development, by reinforcing the centrality of the market. An implicit first-world/third-party criterion also operated in most definitions of the "traditional" economy, which excluded certain aspects of women's unpaid work from economic analysis and reinforced the North as the model for development (*ibid.*: xv, 190). Only the basic-needs approach explicitly asserted the importance of unpaid domestic labor in addition to women's other nonmarket work. While it also privileged the market, its treatment of economic activity requires a somewhat different reading from those discussed above.

Economists focusing on basic needs argued that development must concentrate on the provision of minimum levels of health, education, nutrition, housing,

water supply, and sanitation if world poverty was to be eradicated (Streeten *et al.* 1981: vii, 25). The importance of poor women's unpaid domestic labor to this process was recognized from the outset (*ibid.*: 5). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO),

[Women's] contribution to the satisfaction of the basic needs of the household is as great as, if not greater than, that of men. Rural women in particular share with men, and often (especially in some African countries) take the major responsibility for, the task of growing food crops for the family. ... Their household activities are completely ignored in the statistics of national product. Yet they prepare food, fetch and carry water and wood... make, or at least wash and mend, the family's clothes, look after and educate children, and maintain minimum standards of health and cleanliness in the home.

(ILO 1977: 60)

This presentation of women's work is not founded upon an underlying first-world/third-party criterion. Unpaid domestic labor resembling that performed in the first world, such as washing clothes, looking after children, and cleaning house, is treated as central to the basic-needs approach, as is other nonmarket work which is generally particular to women in some areas of the South, such as growing crops, carrying water and fuel, and making clothes. However, despite its promise in promoting the inclusion of all aspects of Southern women's unpaid labor, the basic-needs approach does not ultimately challenge the market focus in development economics which contributes to the marginalization of such labor. The potential for improving market indicators is a recurrent theme in *First Things First*: "better performance in meeting basic needs tends to lead to higher growth rates in the future" (Streeten *et al.* 1981: 101).

A postcolonial feminist reading of basic needs must begin with the importance of nonmarket work to development. Lourdes Benería and Gita Sen have pointed out that the basic needs literature presents unpaid domestic labor as instrumental to the goal of basic needs (and, by extension, market growth). The potential benefits of a basic-needs strategy for women are therefore limited because their subordinate position is not challenged and may be reinforced by policy (Benería and Sen 1982: 169). Streeten suggests that

Women and the roles they are permitted to play are important for meeting basic needs. ... Strategies that improve the education, income, and access to basic needs of women may be more productive than other approaches because of the role of women in child care, food preparation, and education in the home.

(Streeten *et al.*: 157)

Streeten's remarks imply that the basic-needs strategy (and consequent increases in market growth) depends on the exploitation of "women and the roles they are permitted to play," especially their unpaid domestic labor. This is key to understanding the function of basic-needs strategies for development in global systems of domination. While a look at the theory tempts us to accept the gift horse of explicit policy devoted to women, postcolonial feminist analysis prompts us to look it in the mouth. Whose interests are served by directing policy towards basic needs? The answer is that it is contested terrain. The managers of Malaysian rubber plantations provide free plots of land to women for subsistence agriculture knowing that they can thereby pay lower wages (Momsen 1991: 63). The women and their families may eat better nonetheless, depending on how low the wage goes. Similarly, if basic needs policy functions to direct Southern women's nonmarket labor so that it is ever more efficiently exploited in the interest of global capitalism, that does not mean that women cannot benefit from the policy. But it does not mean they necessarily benefit, either, since anything they gain is incidental to the policy's aim.

This shows itself most clearly in mainstream development's assimilation of basic needs. The current interest in gender at mainstream development institutions derives in part from basic needs' recognition of women's work. But the vision of women as the means to an end is commonplace in gender analyses at these institutions. "Investing in women," one such institution argues, "has a particularly high rate of return" (USAID 1990: 2; see also World Bank 2001). This instrumentalism suggests that only insofar as there is a coincidence between women's needs and market growth along lines defined by and for the North will those needs be considered; investments in the household or in women's economic activity unique to specific areas or cultures of the South are not justified in economic terms unless they contribute to this end, and policy interventions which conflict with this goal will not take place.

Neoliberal development

Since the late 1970s neoliberalism has dominated development economics, especially at international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Neoliberal economists argue that "getting prices right" through an unfettered market is the best motor of development, which is defined as growth in the commodity sector (see Bauer 1984: 158; Lal 1985: 5; Meier 2001: 17–19). As we have seen, this definition marginalizes unpaid domestic labor by setting market growth as the only appropriate goal of development. But the emphasis on price as the means of achieving this goal virtually eliminates the possibility of its inclusion. More than any other theoretical approach to development, neoliberal economics depends on the identity of value with price. From this perspective, the absence of price suggests the absence of

economic value, so unpaid domestic labor cannot be treated as an economic activity.⁹

Feminist economists have shown that women bear a disproportionate share of the costs of policies for structural adjustment, the cornerstone of neoliberal approaches to development, and that this is due largely to theoretical biases which exclude unpaid domestic labor (see Elson 1989; Benería 1999). As Diane Elson points out, theoretical marginalization does not preclude (though it may be a prerequisite for) the policies' dependence on such labor (Elson 1989: 57–8). Nevertheless, the World Bank has almost completely ignored feminist critiques of structural adjustment, in part because such critiques rely upon the assertion of unpaid domestic labor as an economic activity (see Wood 2002a).

Again, a postcolonial feminist approach must consider difference and power in analyzing neoliberal development. Structural adjustment policies are only applied in "third-world" or "transition" economies, and they are imposed by international financial institutions without the consent of the population of those economies, often over protests. The unacknowledged dependence of adjustment policies on unpaid domestic labor is specific, therefore, to the women of countries being "adjusted." The failure of the Bank and others involved in the construction and implementation of such policies to see this dependence (an amazing feat, given the vast feminist literature on the topic as well as the aforementioned protests) is equally specific. Its function is to enable the expanded exploitation of Southern women in the interests of global capitalism, via policies to which only they are subjected.¹⁰

Gender and development

As a result of the dramatic rise in the field of gender and development, many, if not most, development economists now believe that gender is an important analytic category for understanding and promoting development.¹¹ However, their interest is limited to market-based discussions of women's employment and credit, with attention to education and health sometimes justified as "social" prerequisites for economic development (see Meier and Rauch 2000: 263–88). In this context, women's unpaid domestic labor is important only insofar as it affects formal labor-force participation or is instrumental to the basic needs of families (and consequently market growth).

The gender and development literature itself sometimes reproduces theoretical constructions which marginalize unpaid domestic labor. Ester Boserup's classic *Woman's Role in Economic Development* makes almost no mention of such labor and defines development in market terms (see Boserup 1970: 29–30). The first-world/third-party criterion is also evident in Boserup's analysis: collecting food and wood, making clothes and baskets, and grinding grain are mentioned as part of subsistence production, but childcare and cleaning house are not (*ibid.*:

162–3; see also Benería 1992: 1,549). Her book thus helped marginalize unpaid domestic labor in development economics even as it brought much-needed attention to gender.

Other feminist economists highlighted early on the importance of unpaid domestic labor in their analyses of development (see Benería and Sen 1981, 1982; Sen and Grown 1987). Nevertheless, contemporary discussions of women's work in the literature often exclude such labor (Wood 1997: 64). No generalization can be made about the role of the gender and development literature in the marginalization of women's unpaid domestic labor, except that a feminist perspective is no guarantee of its inclusion.

Ultimately, the literature on gender and development is not generally derived from mainstream economics, and often is in conflict with such an approach. It could be argued that the closer an analysis of women and development comes to representing a mainstream economic perspective, the more likely it is to marginalize unpaid domestic labor (e.g. see World Bank 2001). Given the current power of international institutions such as the World Bank to affect the lives of women on a daily basis, it is tempting to frame the analysis of gender and development in terms likely to appeal to such institutions, many of which are dominated by mainstream economics. The danger of turning too far in that direction is demonstrated by the fate of unpaid domestic labor in mainstream development policy, which can exploit such labor in practice in part because it is excluded from theory.

Many alternatives to mainstream development economics have emerged from feminist critiques which attempt to articulate the perspective of third-world women. But feminist analysis of development must also be postcolonial if it is to avoid essentializing women of the South and recreating a new homogeneous model of development based on first-world interests and experience. This is much more difficult than it appears, as postcolonial feminist theory suggests.

Marginalia, power, and representation

Postcolonial feminist theory highlights the operation of power and history in the process of privileging and making marginal. From this perspective, it is not accidental that the unpaid domestic labor of poor Southern women, and the women themselves, are made invisible in mainstream economics. Their invisibility, so violently maintained, is a sign of their significance (see Spivak 1999: 200). The trick is to discover what interests are served by marginalizing this labor and these women in the way that they are marginalized in mainstream economics generally and development economics in particular.

Consider again Lewis's remark on development: "what one gets are very heavily developed patches of the economy, surrounded by economic darkness" (1958: 409). An important resident of this economic darkness is the poor third-

world woman working in the traditional, noncapitalist, nonmarket sector of the economy. Development is the process of eliminating this sector, thereby bringing women into the light of capitalist markets and a feminized/feminizing global labor force. This story functions to justify policy designed to transform Southern economies into something radically different. If these changes serve the interests of the people and institutions promoting development, it is a story which bears scrutiny. If women are particularly privileged characters in the story, it is important to know why.

Chandra Mohanty (1991) points out that much development theory is premised on the assumption of a homogeneous "third-world woman" who has certain essential characteristics: she is traditional, passive, uneducated, a victim. Any development theory based on this characterization implicitly situates development and its practitioners as the third-world woman's savior. The third-world-woman-as-victim not only justifies but mandates development as it is currently constituted, and in a development industry dominated by international financial institutions such as the World Bank this mandate is perhaps most necessary for development economics. Furthermore, development is mandated whether or not the woman appears to want it (because her backwardness makes her a poor judge). Finally, because third-world women are imagined as all the same and unchanging in this scenario, agents of development do not need to learn anything about or adapt to the situations of particular women or regions (see Wood 2001).¹² From this perspective, any concern with addressing or allowing for differences between people/women is misplaced. The coincidence of these results with the core assumptions of mainstream economics and the needs of a globalizing capitalist economy for a feminized labor force are close enough to raise suspicion. The implications for women of the South are grave enough to demand action.

However, action must emerge from the understanding that we are all entangled in postcolonial systems of power and that these entanglements are not nullified by our goodwill. There are no clean and easy answers to questions of development in a postcolonial world (Barker 1998; Spivak 1999; Wood 2001). Speaking with third-world women may serve both to achieve participation and to justify traditional or alternative forms of development controlled by the North. The desire for this speech may be motivated as much by the developer's need to feel appreciated as it is by solidarity. That many Southern women resist development in part by demanding that their voices be heard does not make this problem go away; nor does the good faith or hard work of feminist development practitioners. None of this implies that positive change in the material conditions of women in the South or in postcolonial structures of domination is impossible. It does mean that those who work to achieve such change must learn to live with difference, uncertainty, and the constant need to interrogate what is done in the name of development.

Implications and conclusions

I argue in this essay that aspects of the unpaid domestic labor of women in the South continue to be marginalized in theories of economic development which establish other nonmarket activities as economic. At the same time, first-world experiences shape these theories' conceptualizations of economic activity and development in subtle but important ways. This argument has relevance for feminist analysis of unpaid domestic and caring labor in mainstream economics, but I would like to focus on implications for women in the South.

First, conceptualizations of economic activity based only on the experience of people in the North have material effects. As only one example of this, the first-world/third-party criterion establishes distinctions which dictate specific policy directions with respect to women's unpaid labor; women's work in areas targeted by development policy is driven to look like that of women in the North, with no consideration of differences in that work or the conditions surrounding it. Women may benefit in some ways from such policy, but there will also be losses, which will vary depending on the history and culture of different regions, as well as the skills, personalities, and desires of individual women. These losses are unlikely to be considered in evaluations of development.

Second, while the focus on the market in development economics over time has marginalized unpaid domestic labor in theory, this should not disguise the fact that in practice development policy has relied and continues to rely upon it, whether through the provision of basic needs or the cushioning of economic "shocks" of structural adjustment policies. The rigidly maintained invisibility of such labor in development economics, even in the context of the inclusion of other nonmarket forms of labor and production, is only symptomatic of this dependence.

Finally, questions of representation and power so central to postcolonial feminist theory must become a topic of conversation in feminist economics, because they have material implications. Implicit assumptions about "women in the South" often manifest themselves in the development literature. Photographs and documentaries depict appealing poor women – often smiling, almost always working, usually young, with children, certainly not hostile. Reports discuss the beneficial effects of development on women who apparently have no characters but are always enthusiastic about the project in question. These are representations which disfigure and disguise women and differences between them, and they make their way into policy in pernicious ways. Not all assumptions and representations are obvious, as Mohanty and others have shown, but, obvious or not, they have become so normalized that they can be difficult to see (e.g. Hale 1995). Feminist economics must work not only to see, but to transform representations which enable the (post)colonial domination of women in the South. The extent to which feminist economics itself reinforces or disrupts economic discourse harmful to

women of the South is an open question, but it is one which must be explored if it is not to contribute to this domination.

There are alternatives to mainstream development economics which offer great promise of fully incorporating the various unpaid domestic labors of women in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. While the human development approach promulgated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been criticized for an emphasis on education and health which might lead it to an instrumental perspective on gender, it is much more likely to be responsive to such criticisms than mainstream development economics (see UNDP 1995; Elson 1999: 104–5; UNIFEM 2000: 18–21). The recent UNIFEM report *Progress of the World's Women 2000* works to "engender" human development theory and policy analysis more fully, and does so through an emphasis on unpaid domestic labor. But these alternatives must avoid reproducing subtle mechanisms of marginalization and domination which work to the detriment of women in the South.

Notes

- 1 Using problematic language in reference to what is now often called the "South" and the "North" is unavoidable, largely because this language reflects problematics of power in the world. This is particularly so in development economics, which is founded on the assumption that economies in need of "development" ("poorer" countries) lack something that "developed" economies ("richer" countries) have. I still sometimes use the terms "third world" and "first world," because I believe they encapsulate specific representations of "them" and "us" that continue to enable postcolonial systems of domination.
- 2 Recent interest in "participatory" development at international development institutions is misleading, since such institutions are not accountable to the "beneficiaries" of their policies and decide for themselves what will count in evaluating development (see Cooke and Kothari 2001).
- 3 This is true even of the excellent literature on gender and structural adjustment, which has probably done the most to call attention to the relationship between economic policy and unpaid domestic labor in the South, because it analyzes the consequences rather than the causes of the marginalization of such labor in mainstream economics (see Benería 1999; Elson 1989; UNIFEM 2000: 27–9).
- 4 Such bias has been noted in other contexts (see Hale 1995).
- 5 This can occur even when examples are primarily from the South (see Floro 1999 for one example).
- 6 For comprehensive overviews of development economics, see Todaro and Smith (2003), Arndt (1987), and Elson (1999).
- 7 Bernard Walters argues that the lingering classical tradition in development economics, as exemplified by Lewis, offers interesting possibilities for a new feminist economics which fully incorporates unpaid domestic labor, because it never "attempted a complete divorce of productive and reproductive activities" or "subscribed to the fetish that all value arises from exchange" (Walters 1999: 421). I agree that this is a promising approach. However, the often subtle mechanisms by which unpaid domestic labor is marginalized even in classical models should not be underestimated and require further exploration.
- 8 This suggests the need to qualify Diane Elson's point that Lewis "envisaged what feminists subsequently called 'reproductive work' (that is, the unpaid work in households and communities that is necessary to reproduce the labour force and the social fabric) being transferred to the capitalist sector" (Elson 1999: 97).

- 9 This argument is central to feminist economic analysis of the marginalization of unpaid domestic labor (e.g. see Jefferson and King 2001: 73–4). The existence of mainstream theories of household production does not negate the point, largely because both the market and price remain privileged. For example, Gary Becker suggests that his work applies economic arguments to noneconomic decisions, and indicates his unwillingness to define unpaid domestic labor as economic by referring to it as “non-work” activity and “productive” consumption” (Becker 1965: 494). While other household production models are more inclusive, none has succeeded in bringing about the incorporation of such labor in mainstream economics as an economic activity on a par with the market (see Wood 1994).
- 10 Since it would be difficult to think of a more efficient use of resources (in neoliberal terms) than to pay nothing for something necessary for market growth, any future incorporation of unpaid domestic labor into neoliberal analysis is likely to be as instrumental as that of the basic-needs approach.
- 11 The institutionalization of this belief in the discourse of development economics is less clear, however. Some important texts have only cursory references to women or none at all (see Meier and Stiglitz 2001). Others devote considerable attention to gender analysis (Meier and Rauch 2000: 263–88; Todaro and Smith 2003).
- 12 The teaching of development, as well as its practice, shares responsibility for this. For example, “case studies” are commonly used in classes on gender and development to demonstrate the variety of women’s experiences, but they may also perpetuate the character of a homogeneous third-world woman who adapts to varying circumstances (Wood 2002b).

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