

# Gender and the global economy\*

**Lourdes BENERÍA**  
*Cornell University (EE.UU)*

## 1. Introduction

This paper is largely an analysis of gender issues within the context of an increasingly globalized economy. Its focus is the argument that, as this globalization proceeds, gender issues will necessarily take this increasingly international perspective. As reflected in the slogan «think globally, act locally» that became popular at the 1985 Third Conference of the UN Decade for Women in Nairobi, this perspective is well understood within international women's groups. «Thinking globally» requires a continuous effort to analyze the significance of global economic transformation for different social groups and to understand its implication for policy, action and future change. The objective of this paper is to join such an effort.

Discussions about the economic and social condition of women across countries in recent years have often included topics related to the internationalization of economic activity. These discussions have dealt with a variety of processes such as the growing employment of women in industrial production, the effects of multinational investment on women's work, the participation of female labor in the unregulated sector of the economy, and the intensification of domestic work as the debt crisis and structural adjustment policies in many Third World countries have lowered real wages and living standards for a large proportion of the population. Yet, much remains to be done, particularly in terms of thinking through the significance of these processes for designing policies and political action that incorporate gender as a fundamental dimension.

Women's daily chores, as will be argued in this paper, are taking up a global significance. This calls, as Núñez and Burbach (1986) have forcefully argued, for an internationalization of «popular struggles» going beyond traditional party politics and based on ties of solidarity among different groups. In fact, as women across the globe have so often

repeated, traditional politics, including a good proportion of left politics, have distinguished themselves for being both ignorant and unwilling to take up gender related issues. Yet, if politics and social action do not seriously integrate gender in their objectives, the women's movement, at the different national and international levels, will act more on its own, and the power that springs from solidarity between political movements will be weakened.

In developing the foundation for effective action, and despite much progress made during the last two decades, the analysis needed to inform this work is still incomplete. At the international level, and particularly since the publication of Boserup's *Woman's Role in Economic Development* in 1970, there has been a tendency to separate gender issues related to Third World countries from those of the more industrialized world —thus the appearance of this new «field» called Women and Development. The theoretical framework and political implications behind are far from being uniform and range from the liberal to the left. However, the tendency to view the subject as separate is quite common and runs parallel to that of viewing «development» as referring only to economic growth in Third World countries.

The problem of this separation —in addition to the dangerous tendency to objectify Third World women— is that, as the globalization of economic relations proceeds, the need to understand the role of gender from a global perspective emerges with greater intensity. Where are women located in the new international division of labor? Can we assume that women's labor force participation is increasing world-wide? As international capitalism expands, how are class, gender and other factors influencing women's condition integrated in the face of a rapidly changing economic landscape? What are the major issues emerging in this respect in the global economy? What is their social and political significance? Can generalizations be made given country and regional differences?.

This paper is an effort to analyze some of these global issues. It includes three parts. First, it will discuss whether a feminization of the international labor force is taking place. Second, it will analyze some selected gender issues within the international economy. Third, it will deal with the significance of the globalization of these issues. Although we are not quite ready yet to give definite answers to many of the questions raised by this type of analysis, it is important to incorporate them to our understanding of global change. There is still much research to be done. In particular, statistical information is incomplete and often unreliable despite some progress made along these lines during the last decade. But, most of all, generalizations at the level at which this paper is written are risky and need to constantly be qualified by the specificity of each country's experience.

## **2. Is there a feminization of the international labor force?**

There is no simple answer to the question of whether the international labor force is becoming more feminized. First, at the general level, it is quite impossible to answer because of the many differences by region, country and sector. Second, there are contradictory tendencies at work that need to be sorted out. Third, statistical information is still lacking and, in particular, cross country comparisons are not easy to make. A more speci-

fic statistical problem is that of undercounting women's labor, which can lead to many distortions in analyzing this question.

To begin with the problem of undercounting, if we define the labor force in the widest possible sense—that is, including subsistence production and family workers—it is far from clear that a feminization of the labor force has taken place at the international level. Official statistics suggest that a process of feminization is taking place because subsistence and family labor, which concentrate a high proportion of women, have often been underestimated in labor force statistics. Thus, if official statistics show that a majority of countries have experienced an increase in labor force participation rates for women, this increase might be misleading—to the extent that women have shifted from under-counted agricultural and household-centered productive activities (i.e., from subsistence and family labor) to more formalized and «visible» work. In this case, the statistically registered increase does not necessarily reflect a feminization of the labor force but a shift of women from the former to the latter type of activities.

Similarly, an increase in women's participation in the informal sector does not necessarily contribute to a feminization of the labor force if it represents a shift from the subsistence and undercounted sector. What it does represent is an increase in women's participation in income earning activities. In the absence of reliable statistics, it is difficult to estimate the extent of this change.

In spite of statistical problems, there is a lot that we *do* know. To begin with, many countries have registered an increase in women's labor force participation rates. For the more industrialized countries, this trend has been remarkable during the past twenty five years. For example, for the majority of the industrialized, high income OECD countries, female participation rates had surpassed the 50% mark by the early 1980's. The increase has been significant even for a country like Ireland where the government has pursued policies to encourage male rather than female employment (Pyle, 1986). The pattern is less clear for Third World countries. According to data from the International Labor Organization, the percentage of women in the labor force has increased for some countries but not for others, and no clear-cut pattern emerges when comparing the different regions. The major rise in women's employment has taken place in the industrial sector in which female employment increased by 56% between 1970 and 1980 (UNCTC/ILO, 1985). However, this growth has been very unevenly distributed, depending upon the pace of industrialization in each country. The rapidly industrializing middle income Asian countries, such as Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore, have registered one of the largest increases in female industrial employment. This is a different pattern from the more industrialized Western countries where the absorption of women in the labor force has taken place predominantly in the service sector.

**TABLE 1**  
**Women's Participation in the Labor Force**  
**Selected Countries and Years**  
**Percentages**

	Country	Census Year	% of Women Workers Who are Wage Workers
<b>AFRICA</b>	Egypt	1947	34.0%
		1982	66.1%
	Morocco	1952	12.2%
		1982	36.3%
	Tunisia	1956	6.5%
		1975	37.0%
<b>ASIA</b>	Hong Kong	1966	80.0%
		1984	89.6%
	Japan	1950	25.8%
		1984	54.0%
	Korea	1955	4.3%
		1984	45.1%
	Singapore	1947	16.6%
		1984	88.0%
	Philippines	1948	26.7%
		1985	40.5%

Source: ILO, Yearbook of Labor Statistics, Several Years

The registered increase in the proportion of women in the labor force reflects the much clearer trend that can be observed in most regions, namely, the feminization of *wage* labor. This process has taken place even in countries with a low percentage of women in the statistically registered labor force. As can be seen from Table 1, the proportion of women that are wage workers increased considerably not only in countries with a relatively high number of women in the labor force (like the South East Asian countries) but also in countries like Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia with low female labor force participation rates. In other African countries, this pattern is less clear probably due to the predominance of women in the agricultural sector. In Latin America, despite the fact that most countries have registered an important increase in the percentage of women in the labor force, official statistics show that the proportion of women in wage labor has changed little (and in some cases it has decreased). This is probably due to the reverses in the pace of industrialization in the region, but it is also likely to hide the large proportion of women working as wage workers in the informal sector.

The increase in female wage labor in many countries reflects, first, a progressive process of proletarianization at a world scale and, second, a shift in the productive location

of women workers. The changes are particularly visible in some areas such as the export processing zones (EPZ's) of many Third World countries, which tend to represent the most «modern» sector of their economies. However, it is important to place this dynamic within the larger context of women's location in the economy. Labor force statistics show that the large majority of women in the Third World are still engaged in agricultural work. This is the case for Asia, Africa and the Middle East where about 70 per cent of the women counted in the labor force are in agriculture. Latin America is the exception; the very low proportion of women in this sector and the high proportion in services, relative to other Third World regions, is similar to that of the more industrialized Western countries. This reflects the traditionally higher concentration of men in Latin American agriculture but also the undercounting of women in the sector.

### **3. The internationalization of gener issues**

Given this rather predominant feminization of the labor force at the international level, the need to analyze gender issues from a global perspective becomes more apparent. In this section, several current issues are presented as illustrations of this process. First, the subject of employment by international capital is taken up to be followed by an analysis of issues related to discriminatory practices and working conditions. The section ends with a brief analysis of prostitution and the impact of the debt crisis on women.

#### **A. Transnational capital and women's employment**

In the recent literature on the new international division of labor, writings on the employment of women by transnational firms have been prominent. In particular, research has emphasized the high concentration of women in the EPZ's of the world and in other areas, such as the US-Mexico border, that have attracted large amounts of multinational investment in export-oriented, labor intensive production. This literature focuses mostly on Third World countries and has tended to emphasize the exploitative and precarious conditions under which women tend to be employed (Safa, 1981; Nash and Fernández-Kelly, eds., 1983; Heyzer, 1984).

Although this research has been very illuminating, its prominence has tended to exaggerate the importance of women's employment by multinational capital, particularly if judged from the relatively small proportion of direct female employment that it represents. Although there are few estimates and much more information is needed, the available figures indicate that direct multinational employment in Third World countries may represent no more than two million women; this represents less than 1% of the female labor force in the Third World and about 3% of total world wide multinational employment. For the labor force as a whole, direct employment by multinational firms represents only about 0.5% (UNCTC/ITO, 1985).

There are, however, reasons why this topic has been prominent in the literature. Although there is great variation from country to country, multinational investment and its employment of women is important, for example, in the newly industrialized countries (or NIC's) and in areas of high concentration of international investment, such as the EPZ's. In addition, the *indirect effects* of multinational employment of women need to be taken into consideration. Multinationals generate a multiplier effect through subcontracting chains,

linking them with domestic firms of all sizes; women's employment is generated particularly in labor-intensive production. Thus, in a study of subcontracting firms in Mexico City, it was found that the employment of women was on the increase among most of the firms studied; and that the proportion of women in the firm's labor force tended to be higher at the lower echelons of subcontracting (Benería and Roldán, 1987) Although estimates of these indirect effects are lacking, the extent of their occurrence appears to be far reaching.

Another indirect effect of multinational capital is the setting of employment trends through a process by which domestic capital «discovers» or «accepts» women workers and an emulation effect takes place. Similarly, multinational employment tends to have a consumer effect by facilitating consumerist practices; this results not only from the relatively high level of wages paid by multinationals, as compared to national firms, but also from the integration of workers into the international consumer market that the process often entails.

One result of the new employment of women in labor intensive production is that we can no longer emphatically state, as Boserup did for the 1960's, that «when larger industries gradually drive the home industries out of business, women lose their jobs...» (Boserup, 1970: 111). She also emphasized a tendency for women to be self-employed and in family-based industries. One of the reasons for this tendency, she argued, was what she called «employers preference for male workers,» that is, «the preferential recruitment of male labor to large-scale industries, which cannot violate the rules so easily as the smaller ones.» (p. 113) Similarly, she spoke of the prejudices involving the employment of women, such as «the fear that women might be exposed to a demoralizing influence in factory surroundings.» (p. 116) Although some of these genderbased prejudices are still at work twenty years later, important changes have taken place, particularly in terms of a greater acceptance of women's presence in the paid labor force and in the shift in employers' preference from men to women in some industrial production processes.

This preference-shift has been amply documented for the case of labor intensive, cheap labor, export processing industries associated with transnational capital (Fröbel et al, 1980; Wong, 1986; Hein, 1986; House, 1986) and also with national capital (Benería and Roldán, 1987). It is well known that the proportion of women in many of the world's export processing zones can be as high as 80-90 per cent. In many cases, as Hein has typically argued for Mauritius, this amounts to the «emergence of an important new group of workers,» the majority of which are under 25, single, and with a relatively high level of education. Hein found that the majority of women workers hired in Mauritius during the 1970s had completed or nearly completed primary school—in contrast with the pre-1972 situation in which they were over 25, not single, and with very low levels of education. As the globalization of production moves from factory work to the «global office», as has already begun to happen, the new global worker is likely to have even higher levels of schooling.

For all these reasons, and because multinational employment plays a leading role in the dynamics of the global economy, its effects on women's economic condition seem to be important. However, the issue needs to be placed in its proper perspective: the large majority of women are not working with multinational capital but are found in agriculture and in the low paying sectors of the labor market. The literature on women that has emer-

ged during the past two decades has documented their participation not only in the more «traditional» sectors of the economy —such as subsistence production— but also in the more marginal sectors of the modern economy —such as the so-called informal sector. Their connections with the international economy have also been analyzed (Meillassoux, 1977; Berik, 1987; Benería and Roldán, 1987)

## **B. Discriminatory practices**

Regardless of the economic sector in which they are involved, women's low wages relative to men's have been widely documented across countries. Although the wage gap does not result simply from discrimination practices, discrimination based on gender is universal, even though it may take different forms and vary from country to country. Even though the principle of equal pay for equal work has been adopted, at least in principle, in many countries, pure wage discrimination is still openly practiced in some others.<sup>1</sup>

However, the most common cause for women's lower wages continues to be the high degree of occupational segregation or labor market segmentation between low paid «female» jobs and better paid «male» jobs. This segregation can be observed across countries and has also been widely documented (Anker and Hein, 1986). Yet, what is considered to be a male or female jobs varies greatly from country to country. Boserup (1970, Ch. 1) also emphasized this variation with respect to agricultural tasks and, as a result, pointed out that there is nothing «natural» about that sexual division of labor. Table 2 shows that the same type of argument can be used for occupations outside of agriculture whose male or female concentration is subject to a high degree of country variation. However, there is little variation on the fact that female occupations are paid less and that, when a male occupation becomes feminized, relative wages tend to decline.

TABLE 2

**Occupational Segregation: Selected Countries and Years  
(percent of women in each category)**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Highest % and country</b>	<b>Lowest % and country</b>
Professional, technical and related workers	53.8% (Canada, 1986)	3.9% (Bangladesh, 1983-4)
Administrative and managerial workers	64.4% (Sweden, 1986)	3.6% (Rep. Korea, 1986)
Clerical workers	80.3% (United States, 1986)	2.4% (Togo, 1981)
Sales Workers	85.4% (Togo, 1981)	22.8% (Costa Rica, 1984)
Agriculture, animal husbandry and forestry workers	47.6% (Japan, 1986)	6.2% (Chile, 1982)
Production related workers and laborers	33.4% (Hong Kong, 1986)	6.2% (Gambia, 1983)
Service workers	73.3% (Austria, 1986)	12.6% (Zambia, 1980)

Source: ILO, Yearbook of Labor Statistics (1987)

Labor market segmentation is not only related to gender but to other factors such as race and ethnicity. The globalization of production increases the complexity of the interaction between these factors, given the possibility for capital to fragment the labor market and take advantage of these divisions at the international level. Studies dealing with the effect of this interaction on women have begun to emerge (Ong, 198; Fernandez-Kelly, 1989). Yet, this is an area of research that remains largely undeveloped.

Despite indications that segregation has been decreasing in recent years, even if slightly, in some industrialized countries (Beller, 1984; Reskin and Hartmann, 1986), it is still very high across countries (Anker and Hein, 1985). The fact that it is a universal pheno-



menon found under different economic and political conditions indicates that it is not just a product of capitalist institutions and that its stubbornness is likely to continue to be a source of gender differentiation under different economic regimes. Yet, little has been done to deal with consequences of job segregation at the international level. Comparable worth policies have been discussed only in a handful of countries and implemented, in a piecemeal fashion, in even fewer. The very concept of equal pay for work of equal value, which developed because equal pay for equal work laws can hardly be put into practice if men and women do different work, is practically unknown in many countries. In addition, the difficulty of implementing comparable worth policies and the opposition that it faces from business and conservative circles do not allow much optimism for the immediate future. Worse still, continuous restructuring of labor hierarchies can undermine these policies: the current creation of new low paid jobs in industrialized economies provides numerous examples. This problem is intensified through the possibilities offered by internationalized production where the global office (i.e., the shifting of office work to lower wage countries, such as the Caribbean and Ireland in the case of US corporations) is but the newest form threatening, for example, some of the successful comparable worth cases fought in the United States during the past decade.

Despite this not very optimistic outlook, the importance of continuously pointing out the existence of discriminatory practices and the effects of segregation on women's wages needs to be emphasized as these issues take on an international dimension. The existence of a large pool of female labor at a world scale is being used to deal with the pressures of international competition, profitability crises, and economic restructuring that characterize the current reorganization of production. The availability of cheap female labor has also been an instrumental factor in the export-led policies of Third World countries shifting from previous import-substitution strategies.

While the jobs that these policies have generated represent a positive step for women's employment, the new demand for their labor is, at the same time, based on their subordinate position in society. In fact, the reasons for this new preference for women workers, as they have emerged from different studies, are more complex than what is implied by the cheap labor argument and can be summarized as falling in three categories. First, women workers are assumed to facilitate *labor control and labor malleability* for a variety of reasons, such as their willingness to follow orders, greater discipline, and other characteristics falling under the stereotype of docility. Whether these «gender traits» are real or assumed, they can be one of the reasons for this preference. Second, in some cases, women are hired for reasons having to do with *productivity*, as when it is reported that women work better with small objects. This is the old nimble fingers argument which, in some cases, represents the recognition and use of skills that women have acquired through their gender socialization and work experience, as with the case of garment work. Third, women provide an important source of *flexible labor* through their predominance in temporary contracts as well as in part time and unstable work; this flexibility facilitates the maximum adjustment of labor supply to the requirements and oscillations of labor demand.<sup>2</sup> The importance of this adjustment is apparent for the peripheral, informalized labor processes, but it also applies to more formal types of work and has been an important factor in recent economic restructuring of industrialized countries.<sup>3</sup>

### C. Prostitution and sex-related tourism

A rather different illustration of a gender dimension in the global economy, is the expansion of sex-related tourism whose increase during the past decades has been dramatic in some countries. The cases of several South East Asia countries—South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines in particular—are well known and raise similar issues.

During the past fifteen years, different women's organizations and individual researchers have worked on questions related to international prostitution while critics have pointed out that there is no solid basis for the outcry that it has produced. On balance, it seems important to emphasize that this is a good example of the internationalization of gender issues. Estimates of the size of this industry show very high numbers: 100,000 «hospitality girls» with licenses and health certificates from the Ministry of Labor and Employment in the Philippines in 1979; a similar number of prostitutes and 200,000 «masseuses» was estimated for Bangkok in 1977 and for Thailand as a whole the estimated number of prostitutes in 1981 ranged between 500,000 and 700,000 (Truong Than-Dam, 1983 and 1988). In relative terms, this figure for Bangkok alone amounts to ten per cent of female employment by multinationals. Estimates for South Korea and the Philippines also point to very high figures (Wood, 1981; Aguilar, 1987). Wages received by prostitutes and the cost of sex-related services in these countries are much lower than in the client countries. However, this is not to say that prostitution is just a matter of relative costs. In fact, it is a good illustration of the crossroads of race, gender, class and cultural differences, and of the complexities of their interaction in creating patterns of subordination and domination. As a woman who had worked on an island in the Philippines put it:

«When the tourists started to come, the beach saw new hot-blooded men making it with brown girls... If you ask these blue-eyed men why they came here, they tell you that the girls serve them like kings in heaven with many docile feminine playmates» (Ó Campo, 1987: 69)

And who are «the girls»? The great majority of course come from the poorest areas and households, such as the Northern regions in Thailand (Phongpaichit, 1980) and the marginal population of Manila slums (Aguilar, 1987).

This clearly points out the connections between prostitution and poverty, as generated by an economic system based on class inequality and regional differences. In addition, international prostitution raises other issues that are relevant in an analysis of gender in the global economy. First, it illustrates the connection between the development of the international tourist industry and the rise of prostitution organized at a larger scale. Second, both sex-tourism and prostitution are stimulated by the growing internationalization of capital, as it expands the international business class (its primary client) and facilitates international traffic and exchange. Third, they are connected with the existence of military activities and foreign military bases, as in the case of the Asian countries mentioned above. Fourth, although prostitution is an old business, what is new in these cases is its significant magnitude and economic significance as a source of foreign exchange and in the promotion of business ventures where government and corporate interests meet. In most of these countries, the state has taken a very active role to promote sex-related industries through tourist promotion, issuing of licences, and international advertising. Wo-

men are the «raw material» of this industry and as such we must be aware of and act upon their exploitation. It is too early to assess the effects of AIDS on international prostitution although this is clearly another illustration of the globalization of gender issues.

#### **D. Economic crises and women's work**

A final illustration of a gender dimension in the functioning of the global economy comes from the role of women in household adjustments to the austerity policies generated by the foreign debt crises in many Third World countries. Initial studies of the impact of the debt crisis adjustment on the poor have described the negative impact of these policies on the poor, particularly in Latin America and Africa (Cornia, Jolly and Stewart, eds., 1987, Vol. 1 and 2). These studies have illustrated how households survive under severe economic conditions and what kind of mechanisms they use to compensate for lower incomes and deteriorating access to resources. Thus, Cornia (Vol. 1, Ch. 4) has analyzed in detail the different ways in which households either use their available resources more efficiently or generate new ones in order to cope with critical conditions. These household responses range from changes in purchasing habits, food preparation and consumption patterns to the incorporation of new household members in the labor force, increased production for own consumption, migration, and reliance on the extended family.

One missing element in this analysis was the role played by women. Yet, the nature of these coping mechanisms suggested that women play a very extensive role in dealing with the effects of the crisis. Food production, shopping, and household organization are mostly part of women's daily responsibilities. Likewise, the incorporation of *new* members in the labor force is likely to involve particularly women and the young, given their lower participation in paid production. Women also tend to be involved in coping strategies that shift household activities to more collective processes. Such is the case with the «comedores populares» in Lima or the «ollas comunes» in Bolivia (neighborhood-based communal kitchens) whose organization has given women a new, even if temporary and precarious, social function (Sara-Lafosse, 1986).

More recent studies on different countries have begun to document the dynamics of household adjustments to the debt crisis and the distribution of the burden among household members. Although this burden has been felt by everyone, the chores of daily survival and domestic work has placed a very heavy weight on housewives, mothers and daughters. It has been felt not only in poor and working class households but also among the middle class (Benería, forthcoming).

How these processes are connected with the global economy is quite obvious. The significance of the debt as the latest form of surplus extraction from the Third World and its connection with international financing and patterns of trade and investment imply that the daily troubles of a Bolivian miner's wife, for example, are directly related to the functioning of the international economy. As women across countries understand increasingly these mechanisms, their daily struggles take up a global significance. Given the universality of gender as an organizing principle, it should be central to our analysis and in designing policies and action.

#### 4. Evaluationg change

Does the increasing visibility of women in the global economy represent a positive change for them? This is not a simple question to answer since there are contradictory factors at work. The debate on this subject, in fact, results in part from differences between countries and can hardly be resolved without paying attention to the specificity of each case. At a general level, there are those who think that, among working women as a whole, the emerging trends in the international economy have represented «a definite improvement in women's economic status,» particularly in the industrial sector (Joeques, 1987). However, given women's primary responsibility in reproductive activities and their concentration in household work, any evaluation of the overall situation needs to take this sphere into consideration.

This implies that it is useful to distinguish between at least two levels of analysis: one that focuses on gender relations and asymmetries in the labor market and another that focuses on household and family relations. Thus, one way of posing this question, as Elson and Pearson (1981) have suggested, is to ask whether gender is being «decomposed» or broken down as a result of global changes. Here, too, change is not unidimensional. The feminization of the labor force in some countries and the increasing participation of women in the global economy has been accompanied with a higher degree of labor force attachment and economic autonomy for the majority of women. This is the case for the more industrialized countries, and there is no reason to believe that similar results are not taking place in other countries.

The significance of this new labor force attachment and autonomy for women should be clear. An income of their own, even when it may not be sufficient to maintain a family, increases women's ability to make choices and their bargaining position within the household (Benería and Roldán, 1987). Yet, the spectrum of new forms of gender «recomposition» and of subsequent discriminatory treatment for women workers, particularly under conditions of unstable employment and precarious working conditions has not disappeared. The loss of employment in the Malaysian computer chips industry in recent years provides an illustration of the precariousness of this attachment in some cases. It has been estimated that as many as 40,000 jobs have been lost due to shifting investment attracted by lower wages in other countries. The loss, which affected mostly young women, lead the weekly *The Economist* (Jan. 31, 1987) to ask about what would happen to these young women: «will, as the cynics say, the pretty ones become bar girls and the plain ones turn to Islam?» The sexism inherent in this quote illustrates the resistance of gender stereotypes to break down. It also illustrates the fragility of what otherwise could be considered a positive step towards gender equality.

Despite this type of retrogression, the acceptance of women as paid workers has clearly increased in most countries. The rise in women's employment and the higher degree of labor force attachment suggest the breaking down of gender stereotypes and a higher degree of gender equality. At the same time, this continues to coexist with other types of inequalities, such as those reflected in women's pay and working conditions, and does not preclude the appearance of new ones.

At the household level, there are some indications of a new division of labor in which

the number of hours that women spend in domestic work appears to have decreased slightly in the high income countries, at the same time that men and women share domestic chores more equally (Blau and Ferber, 1986; Erler, 1988). However, these changes are not very significant and affect a small proportion of the population; for most women, increased participation in the labor force creates the need to deal with the pressures of intensification of work and to restructure domestic work and childcare.

At the international level, and despite the caution needed regarding generalizations, the double burden for women workers appears to be a continuing universal phenomenon. Yet some changes, difficult to capture and still in need of further research, may be taking place. Safa (1988), for example, argues that «women's increased ability to contribute to family income may challenge traditional patriarchal authority and lead to more egalitarian family structures». (p. 25) This is particularly true, she writes, in countries like Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic where «women have become critical contributors to the household economy». Other studies show, as mentioned earlier, that access to income increase women's autonomy and bargaining power within the household (Benería and Roldán, 1989).

To sum up, the globalization of the economy presents gender dimensions that are contradictory. The feminization of employment implies an increase in women's income producing activities, which might result in greater autonomy for women, in gender decomposition and a higher degree of equality between the sexes. In increasingly monetized economies, the commoditification of women's work is a positive development allowing them to have access to income. However, these changes are based on inequalities that are likely to persist stubbornly precisely because they are instrumental in the current functioning of the global economy. Thus, women's increasing participation in the monetized economy comes hand in hand with exploitative working conditions. In addition, gender inequality often continues to be linked with the control of women's sexuality and role in reproduction, therefore implying that they will tend to persist unless these aspects are integrated in our analysis and search for solutions.

## **5. Action, politics, and social change**

What kind of practical actions are possible in response to all these changes? How can we deal locally with forces developing at the global level? There are, to begin with, issues that can, at least in principle, be channelled through traditional progressive politics: equal rights and working conditions, trade union organizing that includes women's interests, enforcement of minimum wage levels, bargaining with the state for health care and reproductive rights, maternity and paternity leaves, information about «best practices» across countries, actions against sexual harassment, day care, and other working conditions affecting women in particular. As argued in this paper, much needs to be done also to enforce, and in some countries introduce, equal pay for equal work legislation and to discuss and act upon the notion of comparable worth. To the extent that they are open to gender issues, progressive trade unions and political parties could channel this type of actions. To the extent that they are not and that women do not have an equal voice in these institutions, separate women's organizations become necessary. During the past two decades, we have in fact witnessed a very significant growth of separate women's networks and organizations responding to their concerns and interests.

This growth is compounded by the fact that some women's issues are more difficult to integrate in traditional politics, either because political parties and other organizations are reluctant or unwilling to take them up or because they do not clearly fall into what are considered important questions or normal channels of action. Within the left, particularly important are issues not viewed as clearly connected with class politics; the inability of the traditional left to deal with such cases is notorious. It is no surprise, for example, that the most effective actions around international prostitution have been organized by a few feminist networks that have not always raised fundamental questions about the class origins or class connections of international prostitution. To the extent that such connections exist, it is a loss both to the left and to feminist networks not to integrate gender and class, together with other factors such as race and ethnicity, in their analysis and actions.

The current struggles around survival in Third World countries plagued with the consequences of the foreign debt crisis and corresponding structural adjustment policies are an illustration of the role played by women outside of traditional channels of action. As Carol Andreas (1989: 12) has argued for the case of Lima, Peru:

Distribution of goods and services becomes such an acute problem that issues of exploitation *per se* take second place to issues of survival or reproduction. The crisis in the family and community reaches a point of no return. Those who are excluded from regular wage work play an increasingly important role in defining political agendas, paving the way for the revolutionary transformation of daily life, not only in the production of goods and services, but also in the relations among women, men, and children in their communities.

As is well known, women have been instrumental in the organization and functioning of the «comedores populares» (people's kitchens) in Peru and Bolivia and in many other community-based efforts around basic needs, such as the provision of housing, health, education and neighborhood services. They have often encountered a great deal of difficulties, with little support from husbands, parties, and other organizations with weak understanding of or interest in women's needs and actions. Yet, they have been instrumental for family survival, particularly among the poor.

Survival issues in fact provide an interesting illustration of the connections between daily life and the global economy; housewives in Third World countries with austerity programs brought about by their external debt know that an increase in the rate of interest by international banks are likely to have an effect on their budgets. The experience of the last decade has made that connection between international finance, debt payments, structural adjustment policies and household finances quite explicit. Similarly, women's actions around survival issues raise once again important questions about a development model that results in unprecedented accumulation of surplus for some countries and specific social classes at the expense of others while fostering greed, violence, warfare and ecological destruction across the globe.

There are many other issues that illustrate the difficulty of integrating women's concerns through traditional channels of action. They include, for example, the new emerging issues with a global dimension, such as the «export» of domestic workers from the poorer to the richer countries, and the exploitative conditions based on gender, class and nationality that can be generated by the new reproductive technologies. The extensive work

that emerged from the UN Decade on Women was an important effort to take up all of these questions at the global level and to put in motion international networks working on different issues. How to implement the call for action and forward looking strategies that emerged from it depends not only on the continuous effort of the UN and other international organizations but on the responsiveness of national governments and institutions. In the last resort, it is likely to depend on the vitality of women's grassroots organizations and their ability to exercise power over different channels of action. For women, solidarity among different groups will be useful only to the extent that gender is given the fundamental role that it plays at the local and global levels.

\* Conferència pronunciada a la Societat Catalana de Geografia el dia 25 de maig del 1990. Una versió diferent d'aquest mateix treball es va publicar a A. McEwan et al. (ed.), *Crisis and Instability in the World Economy*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989 (241-258)

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> For example, in Mauritius, minimum wage legislation allows an employer to pay women 57% of the minimum male wage during her first year of work (HEIN, 1986). For Cyprus, House (1986) reports that employers openly admit to the practice of wage discrimination in a variety of jobs. However, where equal pay legislation has been introduced, wage discrimination is more difficult to document, even when it exists.

<sup>2</sup> An elaboration of these points can be found in Benería and Roldán, Ch. 3.

<sup>3</sup> To illustrate with an example from the OECD countries, Women's share of part time employment in 1981 ranged from 63 % in Greece to 93.8% in Germany (OECD, 1985). In addition, all indications point to an increasing use of part time work as an important factor in current trends toward work flexibility.

## Bibliography

AGULAR, D., 1987: «*Charting the Boundaries: Domestic Ideology in Filipino Women's Lives*,» Ph. D. Dissertation, Union Graduate School.

ANDREAS, C., 1893. «People's Kitchens in Lima, Peru,» *Monthly Review*, Nov.: 12-21.

ANKER, R. and HEIN, C. (eds.), 1986: *Sex Inequalities in Urban Employment in the Third World*, New York: St. Martin's Press.

BELLER, A., 1984: «Trends in Occupational Segregation by Sex and Race,» in B. Reskin (ed.), *Sex Segregation in the Workplace*, Washington: National Academy Press: 11-26.

BENERÍA, L., 1989: «The Mexican Debt Crisis: Restructuring the Economy and the Household,» paper presented at the workshop on «Labor Market Policies and Structural adjustment,» International Labor Organization, Geneva, Nov. 29-Dec. 1.

BENERÍA, 1984: «Accounting for Women's Work,» in L. Benería (ed.), *Women and Development. The Sexual Division of Labor in Rural Societies*, ILO/Praeger.

BENERÍA, L. and ROLDÁN, M., 1987: *The Crossroads of Class and Gender. Homework, Subcontracting and Household Dynamics in Mexico City*, University of Chicago Press.

BENERÍA and FELDMAN, eds., in preparation: *Economic Crises, Survival Strategies and Women's Work*.

BERIK, G., 1987: *Women Carpet Weavers in Rural Turkey: Patterns of Employment, Earnings and Status*, Geneva: ILO.

- BLAU, F. and FERBER, M., 1986: *The Economics of Women, Men and Work, Englewood Cliffs, NJ*: Prentice-Hall. Englewood Cliffs, NJ.:
- BOSERUP, E., 1970: *Woman's Role in Economic Development*, New York: St. Martin's Press.
- CORNIA, G.A., JOLLY, R. and STEWART, J., 1987: *Adjustment with a Human Face*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- ELSON, D. and PEARSON, R., 1981: «The Subordination of Women and the Internationalization of Factory Production,» in K. Young, C. Wolkowitz and R. McCullagh (eds.), *Of Marriage and the Market*, London: CSE Books.
- ERLER, G., 1988: «The German Paradox. Non-feminization of the labor force and post-industrial social policies», in J. Jenson, E. Hagen and C. Reddy (eds.), *Feminization of the Labor Force*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- FERNÁNDEZ KELLY, M. P., 1989: «International Development and Industrial Restructuring: The Case of Garment and Electronic Industries in Southern California,» in A. MacEwan and W. Tabb (eds.), *Instability and Change in the World Economy*, New York: Monthly Review Press: 147-65.
- FRÖBEL, F., HEINRICHS, J. and KREYE, O., 1980: *The New International Division of Labor*. Cambridge University Press.
- HEIN, C., 1986: «The Feminization of Industrial Employment in Mauritius: A Case of Sex Segregation,» in Anker and Hein (eds.), 1986: 277-12.
- HEYZER, N., 1984: «From Rural Subsistence to an Industrial Peripheral Work Force,» in L. Benería (ed.), *Women and Development. The Sexual Division of Labor in Rural Societies*, New York: Praeger.
- HOUSE, W. J., 1986: «The Status and Pay of Women in the Cyprus Labor Market,» in Anker and Hein (eds.), 1986: 117-69.
- JOEKES, Susan P., 1987: *Women in the World Economy. An INSTRAW Study*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- MEILLASSOUX, C., 1977: *Femmes, greniers et capitaux*, Paris: François Maspero.
- NASH, J. and Fernández-Kelly, M.P., 1983: *Women, Men and the New International Division of Labor*, Albany, NY: State University Press.
- NÚÑEZ, O. and Burbach, R., 1986: *Democracia y Revolución en las Américas*, Managua: Editorial Vanguardia.
- O'CAMPO, M., 1987: «Pornography and Prostitution in the Philippines,» in L. Bell (ed.), *Good Girls/Bad Girls*, Toronto: The Deal Press.
- OECD, 1985: *The Integration of Women Into the Economy*, Paris.
- ONG, A., 198: *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Patriarchy. Women Factory Workers in Malaysia*, Albany, SUNY Press.
- PHONPAICHT, P., 1980: «Rural Women of Thailand; From Peasant Girls to Bangkok Masseuses,» Geneva: ILO, 198
- PYLE, J., 1986: «Export-Led Development and the Underemployment of Women: The Impact of Discriminatory Development Policy in the Republic of Ireland,» Paper prepared for the ASIDA, 81st Annual Meeting, New York, August, 30-September 3, 1986.
- SAFA, H., 1981: «Runaway Shops and Female Employment; The Search for Cheap Labor,» *Signs* 7, No. 2 (Winter): 418-33.
- SAFA, 1988: «Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean,» in *Women, Employment and the Family*, edited by Sharon Stichter and Jane Parpart, forthcoming.



- SARA-LAFOSSE, V., 1986: «Communal Kitchens in the Low-Income Neighborhoods of Lima,» in M. Schmink, J. Bruce and M. Kohn (eds.), *Learning About Women and Urban Services in Latin America and the Caribbean*, New York: The Population Council.
- TRUONG Thanh-Dam, 1983: «The Dynamics of Sex-Tourism: The Case of Southeast Asia» *Development and Change*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (October): 533-53.
- TRUONG Thanh-Dam, 1988: *Sex, Money and Morality. The Political Economy of Prostitution and Tourism in South East Asia*, doctoral dissertation, University of Amsterdam.
- UNCTC/ILO, 1985: *Women Workers in Multinational Enterprises in Developing Countries*, Geneva: ILO.
- WOOD, R., 1981: «The Economics of Tourism,» *Southeast Asia Chronicle*, Issue No. 78, April.