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Review: Gender, Development, and Globalization

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Lourdes Beneria, *Gender, Development, and Globalization: Economics as if People Mattered*. New York: Routledge, 2003

Reviewed by Jennifer L. Mandel, University of Miami.

Drawing on more than twenty-five years of personal experience working on gender and development issues, including some previously published work, Lourdes Beneria's most recent contribution to feminist economic literature is a welcome addition because it makes two important contributions. First, it provides an excellent overview of the progress made (and, in some cases, lack thereof) in accounting for the full range of women's economic contributions and in more fully incorporating women into development processes. Second, she situates women's concerns within contemporary issues in economic development and poverty alleviation generally, and specifically, within current debates on the expansion of global markets and neo-liberal development policies. In so doing she highlights a series of paradoxes and contradictions in existing development trends and suggests policy prescriptions for remedying these.

Following an introduction that broadly lays out the problems and arguments, chapters one and two contextualize the various analytic constructs to be used throughout the book such as gender, structural adjustment and gendered economics. In particular, she foregrounds problems with concepts such as development, distinguishing between human and economic development, emphasizing the former. Further she points out how discussions of gender issues continue to be largely ignored or relegated to separate discussions in broader mainstream economic debates. She argues that this is part of a wider trend in economics generally, and development specifically that removes economic issues from their social and political context. In particular, chapter two highlights contributions made by feminist economists to these arguments, which underscore variation in economic impacts not only by gender, but also distinctive intersections with other dimensions of difference such as class, race, ethnicity, and age. Drawing on a feminist theoretical framework similar to those developed by Patricia Hill Collins (1990), bell hooks (1984), and Iris Marian Young (1990) she argues that:

any alternative analysis needs to incorporate the full range of factors that explain oppression, inequalities, and discriminatory practices tied to gender socialization and women's position in society. The same can be said for other hierarchical or class-based constructions/divisions such as those associated with race, ethnicity, colonial and postcolonial tensions and North-South divisions (p. 15).

This theoretical perspective is at the heart of her analysis of the paradoxical and contradictory trends in contemporary economic development policy and practice.

In chapters three through five she analyzes contemporary economic trends highlighting their gendered dimensions and the paradoxes that emerge from each. Chapter three clearly

demonstrates that globalization, understood here specifically as global market expansion, is not some new phenomenon and that “the links to the market have historically been different for men and women with consequences for their preferences, choices, and behavior” (p. 74). Specifically, she highlights feminist economic literature that reveals motivations other than self-interest in people’s choices and behaviors, including altruism, caring, and fairness. While these are largely associated with women, Beneria argues that they are, in fact, historically and culturally constituted, which is another shortcoming to Western oriented approaches to development economics. She further argues that it is critical to appreciate alternative motivations to better understand the consequences of the increasing feminization of the global labor force. Taken together chapters three and four illustrate one of the principal paradoxes detailed in this volume. Specifically, while women are increasingly engaged in paid labor in both the service and manufacturing sectors -- increasing their autonomy and independence in many geographical settings-- there is a concomitant growth in the feminization of poverty.

These trends are related to the precarious and informal nature of many of the employment opportunities women have found in the new global economy. Moreover, Beneria stresses the importance of not over-generalizing, particularly since gains for women in some parts of the world (the North), have contributed to the losses for other women in the global south. No where is this more evident than in the changes in domestic labor. As Western women are increasingly working outside their homes, they are hiring women from so-called developing countries to take up their care-taking activities. This trend has facilitated more fully accounting for all of women’s work as it becomes increasingly remunerated, but simultaneously has raised questions about how the well-being of families and communities is measured. This returns us to one of the fundamental questions posed in chapter one regarding the definition of development.

In chapter six Beneria suggests a number of policy remedies for the problems highlighted throughout the book, with specific attention to the paradoxes and contradictions emerging in current economic trends. The most basic of these is redefining development to more fully account for human well-being. This entails situating economic analysis in social and political contexts and appreciating geographic, temporal, and social differences within and between countries. In so doing we would engage in economics “as if people mattered” putting global processes at the service of human-beings. In her usual insightful way, Beneria thus brings together deep theoretical understanding with cogent empirical analysis to produce practical policy prescriptions.

References

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