

**University of Wisconsin System Institute for Global Studies
Faculty/Staff Development Institute**

“Blind Spots: Towards a Feminist Analytics of Today’s Global Economy”¹

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The purpose of this brief essay is to contribute to a feminist analytics that allows us to re-read and reconceptualize major features of today's global economy in a manner that captures strategic instantiations of gendering, and formal and operational openings that make women visible and can lead to greater presence/participation. In this regard it is a re-reading that differs markedly from mainstream accounts about the global economy which emphasize technical and abstract economic dynamics and proceed as if these are inevitably gender neutral, rarely if ever addressing this matter.

My effort, then, is to expand the analytic terrain within which we need to understand the global economy, to render visible what is now evicted from the account. The mainstream account about economic globalization is confined to a very narrow analytic terrain. In this regard it operates like a "narrative of eviction," as it excludes a whole range of types of workers, types of firms and types of sectors which do not fit the prevalent images of what globalization is about. And in that sense, the rhetoric about international relations, and its most formalized instance, international law, can also be seen as a narrative of eviction in that they have had the state as their exclusive subject and have tended to exclude other actors and subjects. Both these narratives can be shown to be male-gendered in that they are centered in a vast array of micropractices

and cultural forms enacted, constituted and legitimated in male-gendered terms. Further, they are centered in a Western perspective.

Furthermore, on the operational level one could say that notwithstanding the growing number of top level women professionals in global economic activities and in international relations, both these worlds can be specified as male-gendered insofar as each in its distinct way has the cultural properties and power dynamics that we have historically associated with men of power, or at least some power. These worlds are about the male subject, whether embodied in a man or a woman.

Here I specify two strategic research sites for an examination of the organizing dynamics of globalization and begin examining how gendering operates in order to then develop a feminist reading. One concerns the geographic reorganization of economies and the other the reorganization of political power. The purpose is not an all encompassing enumeration of gender inequalities. It is to specify sites for the strategic instantiation of gendering and for new forms of women's presence. This paper is a mere beginning -- an analytic stage on which we need to place the details contributed by ethnographic research, cultural critiques, sociological surveys, legal scholarship on men and women in their many specific conditions and subjectivities.

I. STRATEGIC INSTANTIATIONS OF GENDERING IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

We can identify two older phases in the study of gendering in the recent history of economic internationalization, both concerned with long-standing processes that continue today, and a third phase focused on very recent transformations, often involving an elaboration of the categories and findings of the previous two phases. The research and theorization effort of the first two phases was largely engaged in

recovering the role of women, to balance the excessive focus, typically unexplicated, on men in international economic development research.

A first phase is the development literature about the implantation of cash crops and wage labor generally, typically by foreign firms, and its partial dependence on a dynamic whereby women subsidized the waged labor of men through their household production and subsistence farming. Boserup (1970), Deere (1976), and many many others produced an enormously rich and nuanced literature showing the variants of this dynamic. Far from being unconnected, the subsistence sector and the modern capitalist enterprise were shown to be articulated through a gender dynamic that, furthermore, veiled this articulation. It was the "invisible" work of women producing food and other necessities in the subsistence economy that contributed to maintain extremely low wages on plantations and mines, and thereby supported the "modernization" of this type of economic activity. The subsistence sector was, if at all, seen as a drag on the modern sector by standard economic analysis. Feminist analyses showed the actual dynamics of this process of modernization and its dependence on the subsistence sector.

A second phase was the scholarship on the internationalization of manufacturing production and the feminization of the proletariat that came with it (Lim 1980; Fernandez Kelly 1982; Safa 1995; Sassen 1988). The key analytic element in this scholarship was that off-shoring manufacturing jobs under pressure of low-cost imports mobilized a disproportionately female workforce in poorer countries which had hitherto largely remained outside the industrial economy. In this regard it is an analysis that also intersected with national issues, such as why women predominate in certain

industries, notably garment and electronics assembly, no matter what the level of development of a country (see Milkman 1980; Beneria and Stimpson 1987).

A third phase of scholarship on women and the global economy is emerging around processes that underline transformations in gendering, in women's subjectivities and in women's notions of membership. These represent many different literatures. Among the richest and most promising is the new feminist scholarship on women immigrants, which focuses, for example, on how international migration alters gender patterns and how the formation of transnational households can empower women (e.g. Castro, 1986; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Boyd 1989; Morokvasic 1989; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). There is also an important new scholarship which focuses on the household as a key analytic category to understand global economic processes (e.g. Smith and Wallerstein 1992) and on new forms of cross-border solidarity, experiences of membership and identity formation that represent new subjectivities, including feminist subjectivities (e.g. Basch et al. 1994; Soysal 1994; Eisenstein; 1997; Ong 1997).

One important methodological question is what are the strategic sites where current processes of globalization can be studied. In export-oriented agriculture it is the nexus between subsistence economies and capitalist enterprise and in the internationalization of manufacturing production it is the nexus between the dismantling of an established, largely male "labor aristocracy" in major industries with shadow effects on an increasing sector of developed economies and the formation of an off-shore largely female proletariat in new and old growth sectors. Off-shoring and feminizing this proletariat has kept it from becoming an empowered "labor aristocracy"

with actual union power and prevents existing largely male "labor aristocracies" from becoming stronger.

What are the strategic sites in today's leading processes of globalization?

II. SITES FOR UNDERSTANDING GENDERING IN TODAY'S GLOBAL ECONOMY.

1) The Global City. Among these, few are probably as important as global cities -- strategic sites for the valorization of leading components of capital and for the coordination of global economic processes. They are also a site for the incorporation of large numbers of women and immigrants in activities that service the strategic sectors; but this is a mode of incorporation that renders these workers invisible, therewith breaking the nexus between being workers in a leading industry and the opportunity to become -- as had been historically the case in industrialized economies -- a "labor aristocracy" or its contemporary equivalent.² In this sense "women and immigrants" emerge as the systemic equivalent of the off-shore proletariat. (I have developed this in Sassen 1988, especially chapters 2 and 6).

Economic globalization needs to be understood not only in its macrolevel dynamics but also in its multiple localizations, many of which do not generally get coded as having anything to do with the global economy. Thus the global city can be seen as one strategic instantiation of multiple localizations. Many of these localizations are embedded in the demographic transition evident in such cities, where a majority of resident workers are today women, often women of color.

It becomes important to understand the dynamics of globalization in its concrete forms in order to capture gendering. Bringing in types of work cultures and urban spaces not usually represented as part of economic globalization even though they are,

makes it possible to capture one aspect of gendering in today's global economy: the expansion of low-wage jobs that do not fit the master images about globalization yet are part of it; secondly, the fact that this job expansion is embedded in a demographic transition that has reconfigured the composition of the labor force towards a growing presence of women and people of color; and thirdly, the fact that the combination of the prior two trends has rendered these workers and jobs invisible, particularly, it has made invisible the fact that these jobs are part of the global economy as it materializes in specific geographic and institutional localizations, notably global cities.

All of these conditions contribute to the devalorization of these types of workers and work cultures and to the "legitimacy" of that devalorization. This can be read as a rupture of the traditional dynamic whereby membership in leading economic sectors contributes conditions towards the formation of a labor aristocracy -- a process long evident in western industrialized economies. "Women and immigrants" come to replace the Fordist/family wage category of "women and children."³ The analytic nexus that a gendered analysis brings is that the transition to women and people of color in the labor force veiled the fact that these are growth sectors deeply linked to particular localizations of the global economy, even though represented as backward or imports of Third World countries via immigration.

2) A second strategic site pivots on the question of sovereignty and its transformation under the impact of globalization. International law, a particularly formalized arena where one can capture the impact of this change, has had the national state as its main and fundamentally, i.e. foundationally, only subject. It has also been described as basically male (cf. Elshtain 1991; MacKinnon 1989). The

strategic nexus for my inquiry is the transformation of sovereignty and the openings this has created for women (and other hitherto largely invisible actors) to become visible participants in international relations and subjects of international law. It is no longer simply a matter of the unified state as the exclusive subject of international law and exclusive actor in international relations representing its people and thereby rendering them invisible both as individuals and as particular collectivities.

We are seeing the relocation of various components of sovereignty onto supranational or non-governmental institutions. This brings with it what we could think of as institutional voids resulting from the shrinking regulatory umbrella of the state. This in turn can produce a potential strengthening of alternative subjects of international law and actors in international relations, i.e. the growing voice of nongovernmental organizations and minorities in international fora. (Henkin 1990; Daes 1993; Kennedy 1992; Knop 1992; Soysal 1994.) It also carries implications for conceptions of membership (Soysal 1994; Baubock 1994). Both can facilitate the ascendance of women, whether as individuals or through collectivities, as subjects of international law and the formation of crossborder feminist solidarities.

Notwithstanding these implications for women, most of the critical analyses of sovereignty have not had a particularly feminist perspective (McDougal and Reisman 1980; Franck 1992; Ruggie 1993; Rosenau 1992), though there is the beginning of a feminist reading of the state in international relations (e.g. Peterson 1992). According to Hilary Charlesworth "the first conference devoted to feminist approaches to international law was held at the Australian National University in August 1990." (Reconceiving Reality, p. 1). Speaking in 1993, trying to explain why this feminist

analysis has only just begun she gives a number of reasons. One is that there are very few women scholars and practitioners of international law; the abstract nature of the concepts and subjects which do not seem to have immediate impacts on women's lives; the emphasis placed in modern international law discourse on the significance of differences of race, culture and nationality and the perhaps associated lack of interest in introducing yet another variable, such as gender; the generally positivist or realist cast of international law theory which does not easily accommodate feminist inquiry. (Ibid, p. 2). A final reason may well be the fact that international law is concerned with so-called "real decision-making power" it has remained a male preserve.⁴

The growing ability of NGOs and individuals to make claims on the basis of international human rights instruments has implications beyond the boundaries of individual states. It affects the configuration of the international order and strengthens the international civil arena. The concept of nationality is being partly displaced from a principle that reinforces state sovereignty and self-determination (through the state's right/power to define its nationals) to a concept which emphasizes that the state is accountable to all its residents on the basis of international human rights law.⁵ The individual emerges as an object of international law and institutions. International law still protects state sovereignty and has in the state its main object; but it is no longer the case that the state is the only subject of international law. The ascendance of an international human rights regime and of a large variety of non-state actors in the international arena signals the expansion of an international civil society (e.g. Falk 1989). This is clearly a contested space, particularly when we consider the logic of the capital market -- profitability at all costs -- against that of the human rights regime. But

it does represent a space where women can gain visibility as individuals and as collective actors, and come out of the invisibility of aggregate membership in a nation-state exclusively represented by the sovereign. Alluding to the experience of Central and Eastern Europe, Elshtain finds a version of sovereignty located neither in the state as such nor in the notion of the "sovereign will of the people," but rather in the "various associations of civil society in dialogue with one another as subjects. The co-existence of overlapping, porous sovereignties is assumed and rights inhere in communities and groups, not solely in sovereign selves." (supra n. 13, p 1376-7).

The practices and claims enacted by non-state actors in this international space may well contribute to creating international law, as is most clearly the case with the international human rights regime and with the demands of firms and markets with global operations.⁶ For women this means at least partly working outside the state, through non-state groups and networks. The needs and agendas of women are not necessarily defined exclusively by state borders; we are seeing the formation of cross-border solidarities and notions of membership rooted in gender, sexuality, feminism, as well as in questions of class and country status, i.e. First vs. Third World, which cut across all of these.⁷

The purpose overall in the larger project on which this article is based was to open up an analytic terrain for a feminist analysis of issues that are highly abstract -- whether it is international finance or international public law -- and have remained inhospitable to feminist categories. This is a mere beginning in a difficult collective project.

References:

¹This is based on a larger piece published in S. Sassen Globalization and its Discontents (New York: New Press 1998) chapter 5.

²See Professor Gracia Clark's comments on how "women and immigrants" comes to replace "women and children" in my account. It is, in reading a new topos which replaces the Fordist-family wage topos of women and children. I return to this subject in the next two sections. Gracia Clark "Implications of Global Polarization for Feminist Work." Conference on Feminism and Globalization, Indiana University School of Law, March 22, 1996.

³This newer case brings out more brutally than the Fordist image, the economic significance of the actors, a significance veiled or softened in the case of the Fordist contract through the provision of the family wage.

⁴For this last point see also Barrie Thorne's observations as described in A. S. Runyan and V. S. Peterson The Radical Future of Realism: Feminist Subversions of IR Theory, 16 Alternatives 67, 75 (1991).

⁵This is clearly not an irreversible trend as current events in the former Yugoslavia indicate, but it does create a new set of conditions that any international legal order must take account of. Matters are sufficiently advanced that even strong nationalist or ethnic resistance must confront the existence of the international human rights regime.

⁶For instance, individuals and groups can become limited subjects of international law; non-state forums outside the framework of the U.N. can be used to represent their interests (Johnston 1988; see also Chinkin 1992).

⁷Knop (1993) notes that if NGO's are to be a channel for women's positions to be heard outside the state, then it is important to develop an international legal basis independent of the consent of the state for NGO participation in the making of international law. (See Charlesworth 1992, and Chinkin 1992 for a focus of giving power to women's NGO's.)