

Reshaping Empowerment: The Relevance of Violence within the New International Division of Labor Debate

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to provide a theoretical discussion on the relevance of conflict, and particularly sexual violence, in the study of women's factory work and its relevance to gender equality within low-income groups in the border. In doing so, I argue that women are active agents in the dynamics taking place in this context.

Since low-income women find themselves powerless in the face of the structural and economic forces taking place in the development and border context, their actions and strategies should be acknowledged within the cultural domain, where values and identities play a crucial role in their finding a way out of gender inequality. A plausible way in which women's actions can be thereby considered relates to women's experience of their subordination and resistance within the household, beyond the material aspects which shape family gender relations.

Introducing sexual violence as a significant element within the household dynamics, as well as the way in which women react to it, provides the means to alternative views of women and autonomy. In this context, the meanings women give to their experiences in daily life are particularly significant, since they are permeated by inherited cultural values. Contrary to popular belief, I argue that it is precisely from this world of values where women often find a way out of inequality as well as *tine* strength to move forward regardless of economic difficulty. The meanings given by women to their daily experiences are, therefore, crucial in finding their own path towards autonomy.

2. Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Development: The Tensions between Exploitation and Integration

Various feminist focus on gender and development have aimed to explain the structural and cultural dynamics affecting the export manufacturing work force, as well as its

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consequences for women and the structure of their households. (Frobel, Heinrichs & Kreye, 1980; Elson & Pearson, 1981; Safa, 1981; Nash & Fernandez-Kelly, 1983). Despite the fact that women in world market factories are a small proportion of all Third World women, their case is important as the provision of jobs for women was by various agencies, governments and organizations a way of integrating women into the development process. Furthermore, the relocation of production remains the clearest expression of changes in the world economy observed since the mid 1970s (Frobel et al, 1980).

The liberal perspective on gender and development considers women's subordination within capitalism an exception from the prevailing rule of equality and justice. Therefore, it implies that women factory workers will find their way out of subordination through their work experience, affecting all areas of their lives (Boserup, 1970; Inkeles & Smith, 1974; Moore, 1965; Rosen, 1982).

The opposite side of the debate can be conceptualized through the marginalization and exploitation thesis. The former assumes the development of capitalism to be the cause of women's marginalization from economic life, translating into a more deeply seated patriarchal discrimination within the household. Consequently, Maquiladora workers find their range of choices limited, maintaining their marginalized status (Tiano, 1994; Rubbo & Taussig, 1978; Huston, 1979; Truelove, 1990; Kahne, 1992). Finally, the exploitation perspective agrees on the underdevelopmental effects of Western capitalist development on women's lives. However, it directs its analysis towards the differential effects of capitalism on men and women, arguing that while forms of sexual hierarchy change over the course of capitalist expansion, the subordination of women remains a systematic feature of capitalism in Third World countries. Therefore, women working in factories cannot expect their liberation (Kucera, 1995; Rohrllich & Leavitt, 1975; Enloe, 1983;

Mies, 1989).

The literature on women and the new international division of labor has contributed to the understanding of global capitalist processes in their interconnection to patriarchal structures. However, its excessive concentration on the macro level has led to a number of criticisms. For instance, Wolf (1992) argues that in many of these studies the women themselves are missing, attributing more importance to capital than to the women it exploits. Women lose all their potential as agents capable of reacting, struggling or manipulating the circumstances for their own benefit. There is a shortage of empirical studies directed to women in the NIDL within the context of their families, households or communities. Only a few works have incorporated this dimension into the analysis (Kung, 1983; Ong, 1987; Salaff, 1981).

The above opens up new avenues in the investigation of the NIDL and its effects on Third World women's daily lives. After all, the feminist debate in the development context constitutes only a recent attempt to combine the issues of class and gender in understanding gender inequality. Broadly speaking, dual systems theorists have approached the subject through a synthesis of capitalism and patriarchy, a duality still subject to debate. There are variations in the form patriarchy and capitalism are articulated. Some authors view them as fused in a capitalist system of patriarchy (Eisenstein, 1981). Others conceptualize them as two analytically distinctive systems despite interacting empirically (Mitchell, 1975). Some critics have argued that to sustain such duality is impossible since patriarchal aspects at the capital level cannot be explained and viceversa (Young, 1981;

Barrett, 1980).

This last point is taken up by Barrett (1980), pointing at the problematic attempt to combine an analysis of social reproduction with one of patriarchal human reproduction, generating a theoretical impasse which represents an ongoing challenge within feminist theory. Bandarage (1984) offers a way out from the so called 'impasse', proposing a reconceptualization of the Marxist feminist theory. Feminists' goal to combine an analysis of changing household structures, familial relations and patriarchal ideologies with that of the effects of capitalism on women encounters a major pitfall: many of the analytical categories pertain to the realities of early industrial capitalism. Bandarage's proposition relies on a reformulation of old categories and the drawing of new ones from the realities of female-headed households in the Third World, representing newly emerging structures as part of a new global economic order.

Part of the process of reconceptualization referred above entails a broadening of the range of patriarchal structures within the analysis, including those mainly tackled by radical feminists, i.e. issues such as sexuality and violence. These areas, despite their nowadays acknowledged significance in the relations between the productive and the reproductive spheres, have been broadly ignored in the NIDL debate. Walby (1990) refers to this issue when evaluating the problematic aspects of dual-systems theory. The author considers that a broader number of structures should be analyzed within patriarchy, adding that an adequate synthesis between the radical and socialist feminist theories must include aspects of domestic work, paid employment, sexuality, violence and the state. This facilitates the interconnection between gender, cultural and historical variation through a theory which encapsulates various causal relations. Including issues such as sexuality and violence in the study of the interconnection between the productive and reproductive spheres, gives the household a broader analytical significance. Even though the household has been given attention, by some authors more *than* others, within the NIDL debate, its most 'obscure' elements have remained unseen and therefore justified within the 'private' domain. The next section will conceptualize the need to include sexual violence as a vital element in the relationship between women's participation into formal employment and their day-to-day lives.

3. Household Conflict: A Decisive Factor in the Path towards Autonomy

Gender first became part of the development discipline through the Women in International Development school (WID), a combination of the liberal feminist approach and the modernization theory of development. The WID concentrated on two key concepts:

the gender division of labor and the social relations of production and reproduction within it. The earlier characterization of the relationship between production and reproduction referred to the dichotomy between the public sphere of socially valued production and the 'private' sphere of domestic reproduction (Young et al., 1981; Tiano, 1984). It is now generally acknowledged that production and reproduction occur within and outside the household, differentiated by the social relations in which they are immersed (Eisenstein, 1979).

Cash, wages and use values are fused within the household in response to consumption needs. The household also constitutes the Locus where communal decisions are made about the members' allocation to various production areas. Furthermore, it is within the household that decisions about biological and social reproduction are made, in order to

provide the capitalist mode with labor power (Tiano, 1994). These decisions have been conceptualized as 'survival strategies' (Tilly, 1978; Schmink, 1984). In so doing, the process of values and ideology socialization takes place in the context of the household maintenance (Selby et al., 1990).

García & de Oliveira (1994) describe some key elements in the 'survival strategy' definition. Some authors refer to the term when investigating the most impoverished sectors of society, using the concept 'reproduction strategies' when referring to other social sectors (Margulis, 1989). Others consider this concept only applicable to short-term strategies, related to unexpected events in daily life (González de la Rocha, 1986). The economic participation of the household members constitutes an important element of these strategies, although various authors are compelled to include many other aspects. For instance, in households that are not self-sufficient it is necessary to channel part of the domestic consumption for self-use, domestic work and the extra-domestic exchange nets (García, Muñoz & Oliveira, 1982; González de la Rocha, 1986). Some authors more than others introduce conflict and violence as part of the 'strategy' concept. This focus is common in studies which concentrate on women's role in daily reproduction (González de la Rocha, 1986).

Three major problems have been identified by Selby et al (1990) in the discussion of households and what has been called 'survival strategies': 1. The consciousness issue, i.e. to what extent can we say a strategy is being resorted to, when the people concerned are not aware of it?; 2. The term 'decision' as part of a survival strategy assumes the existence of a decision space. This assumption contradicts the material reality of most impoverished sectors in Third World countries: so called 'decisions' are actually made on the basis of having no other choice (Wolf, 1992). 3. Finally, the cultural definition of 'survival' has several problems: in some contexts, i.e. urban Mexico, 'survival' does not have ethnographic justification, as people never think of themselves as 'surviving', but as 'keeping their act together' or 'bearing up'.

Furthermore, carries on the argument, given that 'survival' is an analytic term, it must imply that people are able to participate fully in the cultural life of their community, not just survive biologically. Selby et al's conclusion points at the opposite direction: '... as the point of our book ... is to show that people are not surviving, are unable to make decisions, and are even more incapable of exercising sufficient control over their lives to formulate strategies, it at least behooves us to be careful in the use of these terms' (Selby *et al.*, 1990, p. 70).

Although I sympathize with Selby's critique referring to the excessive ease with which the term 'survival strategies' has been used, his view on the lack of decision space which cancels the possibility of real strategies is somehow overstated. Even though at the material level this premise might be applicable, it ignores the existence of other decisions levels related to the sphere of values, political consciousness and change. Feminist studies on the subject show that options for change do in fact exist and are often taken (García & de Oliveira, 1994; Benería & Roldán, 1987; González de la Rocha, 1989).

Criticism derived from feminist approaches to the household refer to the problems encountered when analyzing unequal gender relations and the term 'survival strategies' for that matter, within a unifying notion of the household (Roldán, 1984; Moore, 1988;

Guyer, 1988). In Third World countries, the weakening of traditional relations which

regulated income transfers from men to women and children, parallel to the process of economic development in certain areas, the number of families where women constitute the main income providers has increased (Folbre, 1988). This, far from being an individual women's choice, constitutes an economic imperative for the family's survival. Furthermore, the economic crisis and the resulting structural adjustment policies, have reinforced this pattern, affecting negatively the employment opportunities available to men, and reinforcing women's increasing responsibilities (Selby et al., 1990).

However, the roles which define women as wives and mothers prevail within the reality of their daily lives, either with regards to their marital arrangements or the productive and reproductive activities they perform (Beechey, 1978). Therefore, regardless of women's work status, their first and primary obligation is assumed to be located inside their homes. Their waged work is portrayed as a temporary occupation which will end as soon as women begin raising their families (Kessler-Harris, 1976). The gender-based division of labor within the household is therefore reproduced within the capitalist mode, as capitalism uses patriarchal ideologies to create these divisions within the labor force (Beechey, 1978). The NIDL is replicating throughout the world these same gender-based divisions within and between the domestic and capitalist modes. Within this perspective and considering the analytical use of the 'strategy' term, Wolf (1992) considers that its generalized definition conceals the set of conflicts and power relations inherent in the household dynamics, a pitfall when considering gender power relations within the household. This assumption closely resembles the New Household Economics, where the household decision maker acts in the best interest of the family members (Hart, 1978). Another problem pointed out by Wolf lies in the assumption that the individual decision maker is a male, which in the face of the latest structural changes in peripheral societies turns contradictory (Folbre, 1988; Elson, 1991). Finally, Wolf criticizes its methodological approach, alleging their potential limitations on the field of empirical research. The reason being that strategies are often read into actions that can be measured, partly due to the belief that strategies are subconsciously conceived (Sorensen, 1988; Pahl, 1984; Becker, 1986).

On a different level, Wolf (1992) considers that the feminist approach on the NIDL could gain through the incorporation of a bargaining approach to the study of household relations. Other authors corroborate her position (Beneria & Roldan, 1987; Agarwal, 1991). Simultaneously, paying attention to women's roles in bargaining, incorporates a recognition of agency and resistance by subordinate members. Findings from intrahousehold studies have critically analyzed the way in which rights are naturalized by tradition and incorporated into marriage (Carney & Watts, 1991). They have also challenged the view of the household as the locus where incomes are pooled (Fapohunda, 1988) and the terms on which household members exchange income and services (Whitehead, 1981).

However, much of the terminology used in intrahousehold studies conceptualizes household dynamics in terms of the tools and terms of their trade, i.e. contracts, bargaining and negotiation. Wolf concludes by pointing at the need to closely examine the interaction process, in order to evaluate the validity of terms such as 'bargaining'. At the same time, this vision could obscure non-economic aspects of household life: 'We need to throw open the doors of the household more broadly, to capture the textures of household dynamics and to allow for a greater range of possible intrahousehold relations' (Wolf, 1992, p. 22). This can only be empirically investigated (Moore, 1988), by really opening

the doors of the household to examine decisions such as the entry into the labor force, income contribution, the timing of marriage, the selection of a spouse, all of them elements whose focus centers upon the mechanisms within the household that perpetuate domination or generate resistance (Wolf, 1992).

Wolfs critique is valid to the extent that it condemns the idealist notion of the household implied in the 'strategy' concept, while obscuring the conflict and subordination aspects of household relations. Simultaneously, and further echoing the author's criticism, assuming the decision maker is a male head creates problems at the analytical level, as this model is in many cases outdated within poor urban households. Finally, Wolfs methodological criticism regarding the reading of 'intra-household relations' into actions easily measured is accurate in that it can lead to superficial interpretations, obscuring what might actually go on in the net of family dynamics.

However, Wolfs perspective falls short of the issues which should be included in the analysis. If we want to capture the complete picture of power dynamics within the domestic setting, in 'opening the doors of the household' (Wolf, 1992, p. 22), we must cover all aspects of intrahousehold dynamics, including the 'dark' side of power relations where new dimensions of subordination, awareness and change can emerge. Sexual violence is one of those 'private' issues which have been partially neglected in the feminist perspective on development.

Even though, as stated above, this has been included most frequently in analysis of daily reproduction and it is now acknowledged as crucial in its connection with survival strategies within the household, it is absent from feminist accounts within the NIDL perspective and mostly ignored as a substantive analytical tool in empirical investigation. This could be due to various factors, i.e. ideologically it remains a 'private' issue, while its analytical potential poses various methodological problems, such as the need for people's trust and the availability of an appropriate sample. The above is problematic in that it remains the 'private' affair of the past which extends into the present.

Including this dimension in the study of women's factory employment and their capacity for autonomy, could bring a more balanced account of the interrelation of production and reproduction within the NIDL, while questioning the view of women workers as victims of patriarchy and capitalism. Furthermore, it enlarges the range of issues relevant to women's search for autonomy beyond the material aspects of the household dynamics.

4. Alternative Definitions of Power:

Vindicating the Power of the Powerless

This section aims to find alternative definitions of power beyond its traditional use, in order to be applied to the notion of low-income women's 'autonomy' within the NIDL debate. Regarding the area of women's choices, various studies in the development context have investigated the ways in which waged work translates into women's personal autonomy, self-esteem and greater negotiation within the household (de Barbieri, 1984; Benería & Roldan, 1987; González de la Rocha, 1986 & 1989; Chant, 1991; Lailson, 1990; Blumberg, 1991; Safa, 1990, 1992; Salaff, 1981).

Among them, some have considered violence as a significant variable in examining women's 'survival strategies' in this context (González de la Rocha, 1986; García & de Oliveira, 1994). A remarkable benefit of these approaches lies in the specification of violence as relevant in the relationship between women's work and household relations, allowing for a more in-depth examination of the range of variables beyond economic power that affect women's autonomy and well-being. However, their treatment of violence as an extreme case of women's subordination and further pauperization to some extent deprives it from its social and widespread nature.

Analyzing women's autonomy has also been the means to conceptualize women's position cross-culturally (Blumberg, 1984; Chafetz, 1980; Mason, 1984; Schlegel, 1977;

Safilios-Rothschild, 1982; Yuen & Lim, 1992). The concept has been criticized for being excessively scripted while containing preconceived notions of individual and family behavior. Alternatively, the term 'female agency' has been proposed to avoid the extreme images of women as autonomous individuals or as symbiotic with their families, while offering a broader continuum providing a subject-focused orientation based on practice instead of attributes (Wolf, 1992).

Within sociology, the debate centers around gender, relative resources, and marital power (Huber & Glenna, 1983). Any study which takes on the challenge of interpreting women's place in the web of production and reproduction finds itself in the midst of multiple variables, themselves subject to historical variation. In the case of the relationship between waged work and personal autonomy, most studies have related the reproduction sphere to issues such as fertility, domestic work and the managing of decisions (Blumberg, 1991; Safa, 1990; Salaff, 1981).

A further aspect of most studies on female autonomy in the development context refers to income control as a major means of acquiring power within the domestic setting. Even though researchers admit the existence of other dependent variables in measuring power (Blumberg, 1991), the relative male/female control of income and other resources remains, in practice, the single most studied variable of all. However, these issues do not entirely reflect the range of power structures encountered within the household. Also in this context, violence has been mentioned in few studies on the subject while remaining detached from the analytical core.

However, various perspectives in the development context show that women's control over family resources do indeed increase their self-esteem, participation in decision making, and ability to make reproductive choices (Blumberg, 1991; Roldan, 1982; Kusterer *et al.* 1981; Safa, 1991). These findings are almost homogeneous despite some variations, i.e. Salaff (1981) found that industrialization may broaden women's boundaries for negotiation within a kinship system where they already have a position and certain rights. In a highly patriarchal kinship system, however, industrial employment and wage earning does not seem to chip away at the family power structure or let women in.

Ultimately, most studies on the subject both in the West and the Third World, find a positive correlation between level of income and responsibility for decision-making. The main assumptions underneath this premise are as follows: 1. Family members active as wage earners tend to exercise greater authority than non-wage earners. 2. The individual who earns the higher amount of money will have greater say and responsibility for decisions. Consequently, the relationship between money and authority has been assumed to be straightforward.

However, the research carried out on the subject remains inconclusive. For instance, the traditional wives' role may be so powerful as to withstand a direct assault on the premise that wives do not contribute materially to the support of the family. Consequently, women's earning could be written off as supplementary (Hertz, 1992). This enables men to remain cushioned and privileged in relation to women (Segal, 1990). Furthermore, imprecise measures of authority are being used, i.e. when employing survey items which refer to 'control over spending' there might be missing subtle but real shifts in authority. One important omission in research on money and authority is how dual earner-couples attribute meaning to money in family life (Hertz, 1992),

According to the above, the way power is defined and conceptualized is crucial for an account of women's participation in the work force and its effect on their daily lives. Early feminist analysis portrayed power as a unidirectional, top-down process, beginning from an awareness that relations between men and women have occurred in a context in which there has been connection between gender and power. Other analysis of power, including more sophisticated feminist analysis, refer to power relations as a process whereby those with power can organize those less powerful according to their own ends.

Regarding the latter, power relations are always considered reciprocal, involving autonomy and dependence in each direction (Guidens, 1984). This premise stands against an overestimation of the power of the powerful. However, in the area of personal life, women's traditional lack of access to independent economic resources within marriage, has been pivotal to the normal functioning of domestic arrangements to suit men's needs (Segal, 1990).

The definition of power is also a cultural issue, embodied in the traditional conception of masculinity. As stated by Segal (1990), masculinity is structured through contradiction, the more it asserts itself, the more it calls itself into question as it is not a single essence. It exists in the power to assert control over women, over other men, over their own bodies, over machines and technology (Segal, 1990). However, it is not a question of male urges propelling men towards assertiveness or anxiety over impotence, but of how different men occupy the positions of dominance they are awarded. Furthermore, not all men have found it possible or desirable to participate in the social relations which generate dominance (Segal, 1990).

The same complexity applies to the social construction of femininity in its interrelation with power and/or dependence. 'Modern' femininities defending economic independence and physical attractiveness in the West (Walby, 1990), clash with more traditional femininities in developing societies where maternity, spirituality and community networks translate into equally valid options for women in their search for autonomy. Similar categories emerge within nations and among classes and races. In opposition to the material conception of autonomy in the West we find instances of apparently subjective and irrational behavior from women in the Third World exercising resistance through oracles and magic (Behar, 1989; Marcos, 1989). Therefore, the concept of "women's resistance remains attached to the economic and cultural contexts from which the social conditions of dominance emerge.

A further theoretical impasse arises from the attempt to apply the traditional concept of power to the experience of Third World women, leading towards an ideological barrier which segregates the reality of most Third World women from categories used for

measuring power in the West. Therefore, in order to measure power in this context, a conceptual reconstruction is called upon, so that women themselves can determine their options and exercise their choices. This is particularly relevant to the experience of women workers in global factories, since they mostly seek employment out of economic need (Tiano, 1990), rarely in itself an opportunity for empowerment as conceptualized in the West.

The issue of autonomy and dependence is addressed by Griffiths (1992), referring to autonomy as a 'problem' for women, because it is socially perceived as a desirable quality which they simply do not have. The stereotypical woman who is intuitive rather than rational, who finds it hard to be autonomous because she is dependent on having a man, is still widely held to be true. Griffiths' argument refers to women's need to reclaim their own 'language', so that their understanding of autonomy can be expressed accurately within it. Autonomy's equation with emotional and financial self-sufficiency is not a substitute for the freedom women crave. Griffiths' proposition refers to freedom as being oneself, and the search for personal identity as crucial elements in women's liberation. She concludes by stressing the need for this argument to be seen as coming from within feminism, white and black. It is a very uncomfortable argument, she adds, that the dominant understanding of the concepts of autonomy and independence are not applicable to the lives of many women.

Griffiths' suggestion is supported by the fact that theories of power put forward by women rather than men, differ systematically from the understanding of power as domination (Carroll, 1972; Emmet, 1953-54; Arendt, 1967). Women's theories on power resemble one another and those recently characterized as feminist, being significant that all women stress those aspects of power related to energy, capacity and potential (Hartsock, 1983). This is the context in which Carroll (1972) argues the need for a move from the understanding of power as dominance, since being without the power of dominance is perceived as being very nearly without the power to act effectively. The author outlines various elements conforming the 'power of the allegedly powerless', i.e.:

1. Disintegrative power, 2. Inertial power, 3. Innovative power, 4. Norm-creating power, 5. Expressive power, 6. Explosive power or socializing power, 7. Power of resistance, 8. Collective power, cooperative power, 9. Migratory power, population power.

This paper recaptures alternative definitions of power beyond the material conception of the term. In trying to identify the means by which Third World women find autonomy, we must open up to new spheres beyond the exploitative economic relations which turn them into 'victims', and do not explore other avenues for empowerment and creative change. Opportunities for change often arise through conflict and power bargaining and it is in this context where violence becomes significant in achieving equalitarian relations, or in the worst case, utter subordination. Whatever the case the issue of domestic violence will invariably alter the taken for granted straightforward relationship between formal work, economic 'independence', and women's personal autonomy within the NIDL debate.

5. Conclusion

The discussion above presents an argument on the need to incorporate gender inequality and conflict, i.e. domestic violence, as a conceptual element in the study of women's.

work and autonomy within low-income groups in the border. A second proposition points at the need to derive attention from the economic elements involved in the relationship between work and women's well-being. Regarding this issue, the incorporation of a symbolic dimension as expressed in the cultural representations of women's daily life acquires particular significance. Paying attention to the cultural dimension of women's experiences regarding gender inequality, conflict, and survival, opens up new and enriching avenues in our understanding of these issues.

Including violence in the academic study of development provides not only the opportunity to enrich the range of conceptual issues under analysis, but it also constitutes a major priority in terms of people's survival and personal development. It is in this particular point where theory and practice establish a bridge which should benefit not only the body of academic knowledge, but also the women in their daily fight for survival.

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