

COLONIALISM, GENDER, INFORMAL SECTOR WORK AND ISSUES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

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INTRODUCTION: FEMINIST THEORY, WOMEN'S WORK AND THE INFORMAL SECTOR:

Unlike women's paid work in the formal sector and women's unpaid domestic and care-giving labor, women's informal sector work has received little *explicit* attention from philosophers, including feminist philosophers, though the vast majority of women in most Third World countries (roughly 80% overall) work in this sector.¹ Informal sector work excludes work directly done in the formal sector — such as work for wages in the public sector controlled by the state, and in the “official” or “recognized” segments of the private sector, such as working for corporations, working for wages in registered private businesses such as stores or restaurants, or as a recognized self-employed professional. John C. Cross, who defines the informal sector thus:

The informal sector (IS) describes economic activity that takes place outside the formal norms of economic transactions established by the state and formal business practices but which is not clearly illegal in itself. Generally, the term applies to small or micro-businesses that are the result of individual or family self-employment. It includes the production and exchange of legal goods and services that involve the lack of appropriate business permits, violation of zoning codes, failures to report tax liability, noncompliance with labor regulations governing contracts and work conditions, and /or the lack of legal guarantees in relations with suppliers and clients²

1. Data published by WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing) states that the share of Formal Sector Wage Employment is 84% in High Income Countries, 58% in Middle Income Countries and 17% in Low Income Countries. In addition, WIEGO reports that the share of the informal sector in the nonagricultural workforce ranges from 55% in Latin America, to 45-85% in different parts of Asia, and 80% in Africa. It reports that existing data suggests that the majority of economically active women in developing countries are in the informal sector. The informal sector accounts for 90% of women working outside agriculture in India and Indonesia, three-quarters of those in Zambia and four-fifths of those in Peru. See WIEGO Fact sheets on The Informal Economy and on Women in the Informal Economy available at their website at <http://www.wiego.org/textonly/fact1.shtml>

2. The Informal Sector”, John C. Cross, *Encyclopedia of Political Economy*, ed. by Philip O'Hara, Routledge, 1998.

Despite its neglect by feminist philosophy, informal sector work has become a site of enthusiastic interest of late in development discourse, feminist and otherwise. Securing poor women access to microcredit for enterprises in the rural and the urban informal sector is at the center of a significant chunk of “women and development” agendas today —equally strongly supported by the IMF and World Bank, by many Third World nations, by thousands of international and national NGO’s and by key UN agencies.³ Perhaps nothing brings home the present popularity of microcredit for informal enterprises as much as the fact that the UN has chosen to entitle 2005, the penultimate year of its Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006), as The International Year of Microcredit. Many of the structural limitations of this sector —some of which I will address later— are lost in current enthusiasm for empowering Third World women by turning them into micro entrepreneurs. I want to begin my critical analysis by trying to explain *why* the informal sector is a more substantial component of Third World economies than of Western economies, and to understand *why* Third World women are disproportionately relegated to this sector. One cannot understand these phenomena without a reference to the unequal forms of economic development engendered by colonialism.

CAPITALISM IN THE COLONIES: THE COERCIVE COLONIAL TRANSITION TO WAGE LABOR

Colonization by various European powers meant being economically drawn into the economic structures of a capitalist economy whose center was in Europe. The induction of Western workers into the circuits of capitalist wage-labor is not a pretty story. I want to focus on an even uglier story —that of the induction of colonized populations into wage labor, a form of labor they were not used to and were not easily persuaded to enter.

Why did the colonies need wage laborers? It is well-known that the colonies were sources of raw materials for Western markets —both agricultural and mineral. At a historical point when Western demands for agricultural and mineral raw materials expanded considerably, trade (i.e. mercantilism) alone became insufficient to provide these materials in reliable, sufficient, and profitable manner. The ability to reliably and adequately produce these agricultural and mineral raw materials required converting colonized populations unused to wage labor into working for wages. Slavery and indentured labor were, I believe, a crucial stopgap, needed during a period when the “conversion” of the colonized to wage-labor was insufficient to meet the needs of production in plantations and mines.

3. Katherine N. Rankin, “Governing Development: Neoliberalism, Microcredit, and Rational Economic Woman,” *Economy and Society*, Volume 30, Number 1, February 2001; pp. 18-19.

The breakdown of feudalism, and the “bourgeois revolutions” that “liberated” the workers needed for industrial labor in the West lacked a counterpart in many colonies, where large segments of the population relied on agriculture and livestock to maintain subsistence modes of life, and lacked material incentives to become the wage laborers needed by colonial capitalism. I will briefly outline four broad strategies that colonialism used to induct colonized populations into wage-labor. The first strategy used to induct the colonized into wage-labor relationships was the expropriation of large quantities of the best lands from native populations, converting the land into cash-crop plantations owned by White colonizers, reducing the abilities of the colonized to meet their subsistence needs.

The second strategy to induct colonial populations into wage-labor was the introduction of capitalist market forces into the local agrarian economies, and the development of “private property relations” in land. Communal village lands and forests were turned into private property, and no longer available for the customary uses of needy village households—a common pattern in parts of Asia, Latin America and Africa. Free firewood from forests, free fish from rivers, and free pasture lands for grazing, became unavailable in many colonies, transformed into items that needed to be paid for in cash. In many colonies, peasants were pressured to grow cash-crops for export to the West, exposing them to the destabilizing effects of a global market. The shift to commercial agriculture in the colonies only added to these strains, since export crops like rubber, sugar and tobacco could not be consumed for subsistence when the market price for them was bad.

The third strategy used to induct colonized populations into wage-labor was to introduce forms of taxation on the colonized. Taxes needed to be paid in **cash**—often resulting in a situation that required someone in the household accepting wage labor. The connection between the imposition of taxation and the “creation” of wage laborers was not accidental, but appears to have been a foreseen intention of colonial policy. Walter Rodney notes that “Money to pay taxes was got by growing cash crops, or working on European farms or in their mines.”⁴ The fourth strategy for inducting colonized populations into wage labor was the strategy of habituating the colonized into becoming consumers of *purchased* commodities—commodities that required cash to purchase and provided incentives for natives to enter a market economy. Some of the “early cash-based commodities” sold to African consumers, (and handed out to potential converts by missionaries in ways that habituated their consumption), included tea, sugar, soap, blankets, enamel basins and plates.

4. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Howard University Press, 1972.

TRANSITION TO CAPITALISM IN THE COLONIAL PERIPHERIES VERSUS THE WESTERN CENTER

It is a commonplace observation that the impact of capitalism in the West was Janus-faced, simultaneously producing an immiserization of the workers engaged in wage-labor, and a *colossal expansion of productive forces*, in both agricultural and industrial sectors. This significant development in the forces of production is not what took place in the colonial periphery. In several colonies, colonialism arguably brought about backwardness in agriculture, especially where agrarian populations were forceably expropriated from their land, and resettled in less fertile tracts, forced to engage in intensive farming using techniques only suitable to shifting cultivation, suffering lower yields and destroying the land in the process. The need to grow cash-crops for access to money often meant growing items such as cotton and groundnuts that were demanding on the soil and resulted in soil impoverishment and desertification. The technological developments that revolutionized agricultural production in the West did not find their way into agriculture in the colonies. As Shaïd Alam puts it “Colonial governments did little to improve yields in subsistence agriculture; they neglected irrigation projects and research into food crops, and denied literacy to the peasants. A backward subsistence sector created low wages and low prices for primary exports.”⁵

Capitalism in the colonies also failed to result in the industrial development it had produced in the West, often due to the deliberate attempts by the colonizing powers to ensure that colonies did not create competition for Western industrial enterprises. Deliberate non-industrialization ensured that the colonies remained producers of raw materials for Western industrialization, and consumers of Western produced goods. So, while diamonds were mined in countries like South Africa, the work of cutting and polishing the diamonds were done by whites in London and Brussels. Since most of the “value” of raw materials is added beyond the very first stage where they are merely produced, and since it is these later stages of “processing raw materials” that are considered “skilled labor,” this policy ensured that the skilled jobs that added value to raw materials largely remained outside the colonies. Furthermore, in cases where particular colonies enjoyed advantages in the production of certain manufactured goods, their productive abilities were actively destroyed. British India went from being an exporter to England of fine textiles to being put out of business when this became an impediment to the cotton manufacturers of Manchester.

A central consequence of these agricultural and non-industrialization policies was that capitalism in most colonies did not produce a significant capital-owning and factory-owning class. In many colonies, it did not even produce much of an indigenous salaried middle-class or a small-business owning class. Many salaried

5. M. Shaïd Alam, “Colonization and Industrialization: A Critique of Lewis”, *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 2003, p. 21.

jobs involving technical expertise or managerial or administrative power often remained in European hands. Explicit racial discrimination often kept the “best jobs” for Whites. Nor did it create a working-class comparable to the European industrial proletariat. Samir Amin concludes “In other words, in the central model, industry, as it develops, provides work for a larger number of workers than the number of craftsmen that it ruins. Industry recruits from declining agriculture and from the natural increase in the population. In the periphery, industry employs workers in fewer numbers than those of the craftsmen it ruins and the peasants who are “released” from agriculture. Thus, urban growth is accompanied in the Third World by an increase, both absolute and relative, in unemployment.”⁶

CAPITALISM, COLONIALISM AND GENDER — A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF UNEQUAL DEVELOPMENT:

Western women and women in the colonies were very *differently affected* by the transition to capitalism. Scholars have argued that as many productive activities moved out of the home, Western women’s contributions as productive laborers declined, and their dependence on men or male-wages increased. This dependence was often most pronounced in the case of middle-class women conforming to the ideal of the Bourgeois Housewife and mother who did not work outside the home. But it also applied in a different way to working-class women, the “Factory Girls” who were confined to the worst-paid sectors of industrial production. Many Western working women were also consigned to various segments of the informal sector, particularly to domestic service and prostitution.⁷

The Roles of Bourgeois Housewife and the Factory Girl were both *less available* to most women in the colonies, the former because of colonial capitalism’s failure to create a significant rural or urban native middle-class in many colonies, and the latter because of colonial capitalism’s failure to create a significant industrial proletariat in the colonies. With a few exceptions, the opportunities for wage-labor created by colonial capitalism, in both rural and urban sectors, used a virtually all-male labor force. In contrast to Western women, far fewer colonized women had access to opportunities for wage-labor jobs in factories, even under the “sweatshop conditions” under which Western “Factory Girls” engaged in wage-labor.

While capitalist development in the West caused subsistence agriculture to virtually disappear, many women in the colonies were relegated to sustaining subsistence agriculture under highly eroded conditions, relegated to less-fertile lands,

6. Samir Amin, *The Development of Underdevelopment*, Chapter 4, Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism, Monthly Review Press, 1976, p. 241.

7. See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, New York, Pantheon, 1964; Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society: England 1750-1880*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1990.

and farming without the help of male kin who had moved on to wage labor in the growing urban centers. While these women previously had kinship-based customary use-rights to land, colonial legal changes often resulted in converting land into the “private property of male heads of households,” weakening women’s claims and access to land even as their subsistence agriculture became more vital for community survival. Women’s labor was often subject to new demands to contribute to cash-crop production on land controlled by male-kin, whose “titles” to the land also meant that they controlled the income generated by these cash-crops. The need for cash also drove women subsistence farmers themselves to grow either surplus food crops or a specific cash-crop on the side, to be marketed to garner cash for the household’s needs—a situation that also increased demands on their labor.

I want to move on to discuss the few forms of cash-generating work available to colonized women. While some women were wage laborers on cash-crop growing plantations, they were often hired as part of “family teams” — which meant they were paid less than men, and even often had their wages delivered into the hands of the men who were their “heads of households.” Industrial labor in the colonies employed a virtually all-male labor force.

The overall cash-earning employment opportunities for women in the colonies were meager, even as women no less than men began to be drawn into the circuits of the market, and crucially needed cash for a variety of purposes. Many colonized women had few options besides informal sector work—selling agricultural produce, marketing food, brewing beer, making handicrafts, sewing clothes, or becoming sex workers.

My historical understanding of colonial capitalism, of the informal sector’s place in colonial economies, and of the forces that relegated colonized women to this sector provides part of my reasons for my worry about the current celebration of Third World women’s empowerment via informal sector microenterprise. I would now like to turn to reservations I have enthusiastic contemporary assessments of this sector’s potential for women’s empowerment.

THE CONTEMPORARY INFORMAL SECTOR: A LIMITED SITE WITH LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

Let me begin with a point about the Standard Representation of the Third World Woman Microentrepreneur in the current celebratory discourses on the powers of microcredit. These representations often occur in the format of Before and After stories. Before receiving microcredit, Maria or Edith or Bilquees is a poor, illiterate woman whose country is in economic crisis, whose children are hungry and whose husband is unwilling or unable to adequately contribute to the family. After receiving microcredit and starting her microenterprise, her children are not only fed but going to school, she repays her loans with remarkable regularity, and she is no longer pitifully dependent on her husband. She works very hard, the business is risky, access to credit difficult, and she does not usually make a lot

of money from her enterprise. But she is often depicted as a heroic figure since the money she makes is crucial to the survival of herself and her dependents.

I can understand a certain temptation to admire this woman, to see her as heroic in being able to do what she does. But when I see several articles on women in the informal sector that have titles like “With Little Loans, Mexican Women Overcome”,⁸ and read about international meetings where women recipients of micro-credit were repeatedly likened to the Hindu goddess Laxmi — the multitasking they do in their quotidian lives likened to a goddess with many hands each tending to a different task⁹ — I start feeling anxious. Part of the reason is that we seldom hear this admiration for heroism when Western women confront the same sorts of problems this typical Third World informal worker faces. When more mainstream women earn very little and work under exhausting conditions, get little help from the state or from men in the household, and single-handedly bear the tremendous burden of ensuring their own survival and that of dependents, we usually focus on how appallingly problematic their situation is. We do not see it as fair or just that women’s labor be seen as an infinitely inexhaustible resource that can cope for state failures to protect the well-being of citizens and for male abdications of responsibility to their dependents. There is less of a tendency to focus with admiration on the heroic nature of the woman coping with a hellish situation. There has been a lot of justified criticism about the figure of the Third World Woman being represented as a Passive Victim.¹⁰ However, I do not think that replacing that figure with that of the poor Third World woman as Superwoman, a virtual Horatio Alger in a sari, is progress! The entrepreneurial spirit of poor and working class Western women is seldom depicted as the key answer to their problems.

Furthermore, while the celebratory literature on women in the informal sector often stresses the fact that women who earn a livelihood are more likely to ensure the education of their children, especially daughters, much less attention is given to the fact that the entrepreneurial activity of the women often inflicts an increased burden on daughters. Daughters end up substituting for their mothers both with respect to household tasks, and helping with their mother’s businesses, burdens that undoubtedly get in the way of time they can devote to education.¹¹ Access to credit has undeniably helped a lot of women in the informal sector provide for themselves

8. Tim Weiner, “With Little Loans, Mexican Women Overcome”, *New York Times*, March 19, 2003.

9. Winifred Poster and Zakia Salime, “The Limits of Microcredit; Transnational Feminism and USAID Activities in the United States and Morocco”, in *Women’s Activism and Globalization*, edited by Nancy A. Naples and Manisha Desai, Routledge 2002, p. 200.

10. See for example Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, edited by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 51-80.

11. Winifred Poster and Zakia Salime, “The Limits of Microcredit; Transnational Feminism and USAID Activities in the United States and Morocco”, in *Women’s Activism and Globalization*, edited by Nancy A. Naples and Manisha Desai, Routledge 2002, p. 212.

and their dependent. But credit introduces its own forms of insecurity, when things go bad, and they do so with periodic inevitability. Factors like ill-health, family obligations that detract from putting adequate energy into the informal enterprise, destruction or loss of one's products, or the loss of markets for one's products can leave some poor worse off than before — not only poor, but also in debt. There are reports that microcredit programs are offering women second and third loans to pay off their dues on their first loans, and that the “excellent repayment records” that they use to justify the efficacy of their programs are significantly sustained by debt-recycling.¹² This is a pattern similar to the debt-recycling that is a burden for many Third World nations, a pattern that does not seem to bode well either for women or for development. And while some evidence supports the claim that women's access to microcredit improves their abilities to negotiate patriarchal constraints in their family lives, counter-evidence suggests that some women face increased violence from men who want control over their loans, and who are irate at the time women spend on their enterprises, thereby “neglecting” their household tasks.

Furthermore, the credit-conditions that obtain in the micro-credit domain are draconian. Exorbitant interest rates, quick payback periods, and liability for the defaulting of other members who receive a “group loan,” make the terms ones that would not be acceptable to parties who were not in situations of excruciating exigency. While the mutuality, solidarity and support among women in microcredit loan schemes are often highlighted in feminist discourses, these women are being pulled into circuits of mutual surveillance rooted in shared liability. The situation is not that different from assembly-line situations where workers monitor and pressure each others' productivity because each person's productivity and pay depends on others keeping up their end.

It strikes me that there are some deep tensions between the “humanitarian” rationales for empowering poor women via micro-credit and the “business” rationales that seem to govern the structures within which such schemes largely operate. If the fundamental motivations of providing poor women with access to credit are genuinely humanitarian, to help them help themselves under very difficult conditions, their terms of credit would not be draconian, and helping poor women deal with credit-related crises when situations outside their control cause them to default on their debts would be given a lot more priority than seems to be the case at present.

Just as the labor capacity of poor women is not infinitely elastic, neither is the employment capacity of the informal sector —an issue that seldom seems to be addressed in the drive to empower women via microcredit. Informal sector work does seem to expand to ensure survival when economies are in a downturn —it does make room for some of those who lose livelihood in other sectors when things go bad. But what does it really mean when more and more people in a particular country are encouraged to seek informal sector activities as a means of

12. Sylvia Mortoza, *Evaluating Microcredit*, Meghbarta, Issue 09, July 2000.

livelihood, and the majority of them are women? How much vending of informal goods and services can a poor developing national economy really absorb without reaching forms of saturation that make livelihoods in this sector even less lucrative than they already are? I find it frightening when access to credit for running one's own business, most often in the informal sector which is "a highly erratic and unprotected sector of the economy"¹³ is being widely pushed as the best strategy for integrating women into development.

The linkages between the informal sector and the formal sector are also often obscured by these celebratory discourses. When these linkages are taken into account, it becomes clear that the informal sector cannot be the autonomous alternative to the formal sector it is often represented as being. Many informal sector activities are economically linked to the formal sector, in at least two important ways. First, some informal sector work seems to be a form of what has been called "disguised wage labor" —for instance, garbage pickers in a number of Third World countries ultimately depend on the existence of larger formal-sector enterprises that buy what they pick for recycling. Chris Birbeck argues that the picker's poverty is linked to working only "indirectly" for the factory that buys her materials for recycling. The "independence" of the pickers and the piecework rates involved keep costs low for the factory. Birbeck concludes that while the garbage picker might be a "near-perfect example of an enterprising individual," that enterprise will not get her far.¹⁴ Subcontracted work is another segment of informal sector work mediated by the existence of formal sector firms looking to reduce labor costs. These segments of the informal sector are only going to be as large as the requirements generated by a formal sector that employs them "at a distance."

The second way in which the informal sector is "unequally dependent" on the formal sector is this: When profit margins in a particular informal sector activity increase, there is a documented tendency for informal work to be replaced by formal sector activities —for instance, grocery stores come into areas previously neglected because of low profitability, and displace hundreds of informal vendors who made their livelihood from vending food and consumer goods in that locality. In informal sector enterprises that produce (cash crops, handicrafts) for export to developed economies, there is growing competition as more and more countries produce for the same Western markets. These factors should give us pause in pursuing informal sector employment as a primary site of women's economic empowerment.

Another problem is that protecting the economic rights of informal sector workers is difficult. Many international human rights pertaining to conditions of

13. Winifred Poster and Zakia Salime, "The Limits of Microcredit; Transnational Feminism and USAID Activities in the United States and Morocco", in *Women's Activism and Globalization*, edited by Nancy A. Naples and Manisha Desai, Routledge 2002, p 196.

14. Chris Birbeck, "Garbage, Industry, and the "Vultures" of Cali, Colombia" in *Casual Work and Poverty in Third World Cities*, ed. Ray Bromley and Chris Gerry, New York: Wiley Press, 1979, pp. 179-82.

work —Minimum Wage legislation, health and safety codes, rights to paid holidays, rights to unionize, etc. seem to be constructed for workers in the formal sector. There are substantial obstacles to even envisioning how such rights, deemed “universal in principle,” can be re-imagined in ways that make them applicable to informal sector workers. There are some interesting suggestions for how to make informal sector “piece-work” rates correspond to Minimum Wage legislation, but even in those areas where such provisions can be conceptualized, there are special difficulties about enforcing these standards in the informal sector, which often falls below the radar of those enforcing such provisions. In other types of informal work, it seems virtually impossible to even conceptualize how to make sure that a worker receives a Minimum Wage —how for instance is one to ensure that the many informal street vendors get the equivalent of a minimum wage for their work?

The abilities of developed Western economies to protect worker’s rights and to offer citizens social security and healthcare seem to depend on their abilities to extract revenues from their sizable formal sectors. It is hard to miss the force of John Cross’s question “If the economy is progressively informalized, where is the state to extract revenues with which to even maintain the current levels of social expenditure?”¹⁵ It seems a serious double-standard with respect to allegedly “universal” rights to advise poor Third World economies to embrace forms of development predicated on informalization, in a context where the size and vulnerabilities of their populations arguably make revenues to protect work-related rights even more pressing issues within them.

Development agendas that focusing on getting women into the informal sector fail to notice that these women are being integrated into a global system of unequal development that has its roots in colonial times. They also fail to see how the contemporary focus on micro-credit for women is part and parcel of an aggressive neo-liberal self-help approach to Third World poverty alleviation and development, one which further opens up Third World economies to the entry of foreign capital, and creates “capillary channels” that strengthen the capacities of financial markets to reach poor Third World women. I find it alarming that at the 1997 Microcredit Summit, entities like Chase Manhattan and American Express pledged to raise **21.6 billion dollars** to support microcredit programs to reach 100 million poor families around the world, especially poor women, by 2005.¹⁶ We need to think critically about the huge global coalition that has formed around micro-credit for women.

Most philosophers writing about global justice today do not focus at all either on colonial history, or on its continuities with the postcolonial present. Many

15. John Cross, “The State and Informal Economic Actors”, American University at Cairo, January 1994, p. 3. At <http://www.openair.org/cross/subecon4.html>

16. Katherine N. Rankin, “Governing Development: Neoliberalism, Microcredit, and Rational Economic Woman”, *Economy and Society*, Volume 30, Number 1, February 2001, p. 19.

discussions, such as Peter Unger's *Living High and Letting Die*,¹⁷ simply focus on persuading affluent Westerners to give their surplus dollars to Unicef or Oxfam to help the global poor. Other philosophers endorse somewhat more Institutional versions of the "take a little from the West and use it to help the Rest" approach. Peter Singer calls for a tax on Western countries that disproportionately pollute the Global Sink,¹⁸ —where these funds would then be used to ameliorate the problems of extreme poverty in the Third World. There is little attention to the underlying structures of unequal dependence between developed and developing economies that have their roots in colonial history, or to the structural disparities that cause disproportionate poverty in the developing world in the first place. The focus in contemporary analytic philosophy is on *distributive* justice, and far less on questions of justice involving *economic production and the global division of labor*:

Feminist philosophy has also grappled insufficiently with colonial history and systemic inequalities in the global division of labor. Take the contributions to the influential volume, *Women, Culture and Development*, edited by Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover.¹⁹ Contributors to this volume focus almost entirely on **local obstacles** Third World women face in being integrated into national economic development and paid work. Contributors discuss local **caste structures** that deem it "not respectable for women to work outside the home," local **religious norms** such as purdah that curtail women's spatial and occupational mobility, and local norms pertaining to widowhood that constrain women's lives. While I am sympathetic to the contributors' insistence that such local norms not be used as "cultural defenses" to justify women's exclusion from paid work, I have some serious problems with the thrust of the contributions. While none of the essays explicitly focuses on informal sector work and microcredit, they emphasize the importance of income-generating work for poor Third World women, and offer positive pictures of women who collectively husk paddy for sale, keep poultry and livestock, or grow cash crops such as potatoes or sugarcane on leased land, (p.43) with the help of micro-credit offered by local NGO's. The contributors **do not pause** to focus on the question of **why** agricultural wage-labor and various informal sector activities are the **only employment options available** to these women, as they are for the majority of women who seek income-generating work in Third World countries.

The problematic results of this lack of focus in the volume becomes evident in Ruth Ann Putnam's conclusion, "Okin is surely correct in believing that for many American women the chief obstacles to economic security lie in the gender structure of the market place and family, and that these are deeply intertwined.

17. Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*, Oxford University Press, 1996.

18. Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, Yale University Press, 2002.

19. *Women, Culture and Development*, edited by Jonathan Glover and Martha Nussbaum, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

In contrast, for the poor women of Bangladesh and upper caste Hindu Widows studied by Chen, the chief barrier is the occupational purdah imposed by their respective religions, and enforced by both religious and secular authorities.”²⁰ I do not discount the importance of the caste and religious barriers to employment Third World women face. But, in contrast to Putnam, I would forcefully argue that the barriers to their economic security are **far wider than these local forces**, and are to be found in an unequal global division of labor that is a historical result of colonialism, and of the continuing unequal patterns of development between Western and Third World nations.

While the term “colonialism” comes up several times in the Nussbaum volume, virtually all the references pertain to questions about the “imposition of Western norms on the colonized.” The **macroeconomic aspects of colonialism** and its effects on the shape of the contemporary global economy are not focused upon. When Western feminists concentrate on local religious and cultural impediments to Third World women’s employment opportunities, without attending to these macroeconomic global aspects, it does, I think, raise the specter of “White women rescuing Brown women from Brown men” without sufficient attention to their own privileged place in the global economy, compared to many Brown women and Brown men. Privilege does not have to be local and direct to be real.

Development agendas that seek to empower women in the informal sector without asking historical questions about the degree to which women are being integrated into a global system of unequal development that has its roots in colonial times, and structural questions about the relative place of this sector in the global economy, strike me as inadequate if we are really committed to creating “development with equity.” If feminist endeavors only focus on pressuring nation states to integrate women into existing structures of development, without addressing the differential costs and benefits of such global integration, some difficult and important questions are being ignored.

We need to think about the myriad and complex ways in which women (and men) in the developing nations benefit from an unequal global division of labor that confines their Third World “sisters” (and brothers) to a variety of unlucrative forms of wage labor and vulnerable forms of entry into the global economy. Discourses on Third World women in the informal sector focus on immediate improvements in their access to livelihood. They seldom ask larger questions such as: how to secure these women greater parity with formal sector workers, greater parity with economically-advantaged groups within their own nation states, and greater parity in the national and global economic division of labor — all of which would continue to disadvantage their lives and prospects even if they were to become micro-entrepreneurs in the informal sector. These concerns need to move to the center of philosophical and feminist thinking about global economic justice.

20. *Women, Culture and Development*, edited by Jonathan Glover and Martha Nussbaum, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 314.