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Accumulation, Reproduction, and Women's Role in Economic Development: Boserup Revisited

Lourdes Benería and Gita Sen

More than a decade has passed since Ester Boserup's book, *Woman's Role in Economic Development*, was published.¹ Probably no single work on the subject of women and development has been quoted as often. Given the importance of the subject and the appearance of a considerable amount of new material since 1970, it is now possible to evaluate the book from a fresh perspective; indeed such an evaluation is necessary. It is our purpose to summarize Boserup's main contributions, but also to present a critical analysis of her approach, particularly in view of recent scholarship on the subject.

When Boserup's work was published in 1970, it represented a comprehensive and pioneering effort to provide an overview of women's role in the development process. In the literature on development the specific role of women had been largely ignored, particularly the question of how development affects women's subordinate position in most societies. Boserup pointed out a variety of subjects that are systematically related to the role of women in the economy. Other authors, anthropologists in particular, had dealt with the role of women in changing societies; what distinguished Boserup's work was her perspective as an economist trained in the comparative study of developing countries and their problems. An analysis of her contributions is in order.

First, Boserup emphasized gender as a basic factor in the division of labor, prevalent across countries and regions: "Even at the most primitive stages of family autarky there is some division of labor within the family, the main criteria for the division being that of age and sex. . . . Both in primitive and in more developed communities, the traditional division of labor within the family is usually considered 'natural' in the

1. Ester Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970).

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sense of being obviously and originally imposed by the sex difference itself.”² Despite the existence of stereotyped sex roles and the universality of women’s concentration in domestic work, Boserup pointed out significant differences in women’s work across countries and regions. She criticized the “dubious generalization” that attributes the provision of food to men in most communities; women too have been food providers in many areas of the world. Her comparative analysis was particularly illuminating for Africa and Asia, where she emphasized the fundamental role women played in African agriculture in contrast to their lesser role in Asian countries and in Latin America as well. While there are many similarities in women’s work in the industrialized urban sector, rural work exhibits diverse patterns associated with the particular characteristics of each area.

Second, Boserup provided some explanations for and analyzed a variety of factors behind these differences. One of the most frequently quoted parts of her analysis is her comparison between the “female” and “male” systems of farming, which correspond to the African system of shifting agriculture and the Asian system of plow cultivation. In Africa, low population density, easy access to land, and less class differentiation than is found in Asian societies resulted in a division of labor where men cleared the land for cultivation and women actually cultivated the subsistence crops. In Asia—a region characterized by high population density—a ready supply of landless laborers available for hire and the “technical nature of farming operations under plough cultivation” discouraged women’s involvement in agricultural tasks and encouraged segregation of the sexes, including the seclusion of women in some areas.³

Boserup’s analysis pointed to the correlations between women’s work and factors such as population density and land holding. Although she was not always explicit about precise connections, she did suggest the existence of a relationship between these factors and different forms of women’s subordination. For example, in her discussion of the economics of polygamy in traditional Africa, Boserup argued that polygamy made it possible for a man to control more land and labor, because each wife was assigned a plot of land to cultivate. Thus, her analysis pointed to an economic basis for polygamy and the bride price. Boserup’s analysis did not explain polygamous arrangements in which wives seem to represent a cost rather than an economic resource for the husband, but it created a challenge for others to do so.

Third, Boserup’s book began to delineate the negative effects that colonialism and the penetration of capitalism into subsistence economies have often had on women. She pointed out that European colonial rule, rather than being a “liberalizing” factor for African women, contributed

2. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

to their loss of status: "Europeans showed little sympathy for the female farming systems which they found in many of their colonies." Women often lost their right to land as a result of "land reforms introduced by European administrators."⁴ These reforms, Boserup explained, were based on the European belief that cultivation was properly men's work. She argued that the introduction of modern technology and cash crops benefited men rather than women by creating a productivity gap between them; women were relegated to the subsistence sector of food production using traditional methods of cultivation.

Fourth, Boserup, among others, emphasized that "subsistence activities usually omitted in the statistics of production and income are largely women's work."⁵ Although there is a tendency for official statistics to underreport all subsistence activities, whether carried out by men or women, some of these activities tend to be specific to women, particularly domestic work and participation in agriculture as "unpaid family labor."⁶ Despite some efforts to include subsistence work in statistics of production and labor force participation, women's work continues to be underreported and underestimated, particularly in the area of domestic production. In addition, the conventional theoretical concepts that underlie statistical categories are ideologically biased toward an undervaluation of women's work.⁷ Boserup, therefore, raised an issue that is essential to a proper understanding of women's participation in economic life.

Finally, Boserup's comparative analysis projected the different sexual divisions of labor encountered in farming systems onto patterns of women's participation in nonagricultural activities. For example, she called attention to the influence of farming systems on migration patterns and on the participation of men and women in urban labor markets. African women's involvement in food cultivation generated a pattern of predominantly male migration, leaving women and children in the village. In contrast, Boserup argues, the Latin American pattern in which women participated less in farming involved a high degree of female migration, due also to the employment opportunities for young women in urban centers. Boserup's generalization, at times overstated, encouraged far more detailed analysis. Her scholarship inspired a great deal of the empirical and theoretical work that followed.

Despite Boserup's obvious contributions, critical analysis reveals three major weaknesses in her work. First, the book is essentially empiri-

4. Ibid., pp. 54, 60.

5. Ibid., p. 163.

6. Adult men may also engage in unpaid family labor where extended families prevail.

7. Lourdes Benería, "Accounting for Women's Work," in *Women and Development: The Sexual Division of Labor in Rural Economies*, ed. Lourdes Benería (Geneva: International Labour Organisation, in press).

cal and descriptive, and it lacks a clearly defined theoretical framework that empirical data can help elaborate. Although Boserup fails to identify an explicit framework, her underlying analytical concepts are often neoclassical. This seriously limits her analysis. Second, Boserup takes as given a unique model of development—the model that characterizes capitalist economies. Finally, despite her basic concern with the position of women in the development process, Boserup does not present a clear-cut feminist analysis of women's subordination. By concentrating on the sphere of production outside the household and ignoring the role of women in reproduction, her work fails to locate the basis of this subordination. In what follows we will elaborate each of these points in more detail.

Theoretical Framework

One of the most common criticisms of Boserup's book is that it is repetitive. This problem becomes acute because the book fails to go beyond the data that it presents; Boserup rarely attempts to derive any overall theoretical or conceptual structure from her empirical data. These data are rich in insights about the patterns and variations in women's work across Africa and Asia, but most of her analysis is purely descriptive. Ad hoc introductions of values and ideology often take the place of explanations. In discussing the growing dominance of men over women in agriculture during Africa's colonial period, for example, Boserup contends that gender-based prejudice on the part of the colonialists caused them to teach advanced agricultural methods only to men.

When Boserup does use theoretical concepts, they tend to fall within the framework of neoclassical economics. In her discussion of the labor market and wage differentials between women and men, she suggests that the individual preference of employers and workers determines the nature of women's work, and hence their earnings. Boserup analyzes demand in the labor market, stating that employers often prefer male labor over female labor; she analyzes supply by stating that women prefer to work in home industries rather than in large enterprises.⁸

This emphasis on preferences constitutes a limited view of the forces that influence the labor market and the process of wage formation. There are many cases in which employers prefer women over men: examples include tea plantations, textile manufacturing firms, and labor-intensive industries operating in many areas of the Third World.⁹

8. Boserup, p. 113.

9. International Labour Organisation (ILO), *Conditions of Work of Women and Young Workers in Plantations* (Geneva: ILO, 1970); Noeleen Heyzer, "From Rural Subsistence to an Industrial Peripheral Workforce: Female Malaysian Migrants in Singapore," in Be-

Many of these are in fact large enterprises. Therefore the factors influencing preferences must be explained; preference is not the adequate explanatory variable. These influencing factors can range from the temporary character of employment among young, unmarried women—an important factor in hiring policies of multinational firms—to the tendency of women workers toward submissiveness, avoidance of tensions, and acceptance of low wages. In addition, women's own preferences need to be seen in dynamic perspective, and cannot be taken as given. They are the result of changing factors such as access to land, household work, family structure, family income, the availability of employment, and women's perception of their economic and social roles.

Boserup does go beyond a narrow focus on individual preference in her examination of hiring practices and wage formation in the export sector:

It seems that the clue is to be found in considerations of costs in the plantation sector. . . . In Africa, the methods of food production are such that women can do nearly all the operations unaided by men. It is therefore possible to economize on labor costs in plantations (as well as in mines and industries) by employing only male workers, leaving the dependents . . . to be supported in the home village by the able-bodied women. The Asian pattern is in sharp contrast: there the predominant agricultural system requires the presence of men in the village. . . . Hence the plantation owner must face the fact that the whole family must get its livelihood from the plantation and this, of course, can be arranged most cheaply by having every able-bodied member of the family working on the plantation. Thus, in the Asian as well as the African case, the plantation (or the European farm) can avoid paying the male wages sufficient to support a whole family.¹⁰

The theoretical implication of such an argument is that the wage is not just a payment for productivity—the result of market forces of labor supply and demand. It is determined as well by the costs of maintaining and reproducing the labor force. This supports a Marxist theory of the wage rather than the neoclassical explanation, and is a concept that is compatible with a patriarchal vision of the male wage as the main source

nería, ed.; and Dorothy Elson and Ruth Pearson, "Nimble Fingers Make Cheap Workers: An Analysis of Women's Employment in Third World Export Manufacturing," *Feminist Review* (Spring 1981), pp. 87–107. See also the following articles in this issue: Lourdes Arizpe and Josefina Aranda, "The 'Comparative Advantages' of Women's Disadvantages: Women Workers in the Strawberry Export Agribusiness in Mexico"; Helen I. Safa, "Runaway Shops and Female Employment: The Search for Cheap Labor"; and Aline K. Wong, "Planned Development, Social Stratification, and the Sexual Division of Labor in Singapore."

10. Boserup, pp. 77–78.

of family income. Women's wages, then, are viewed as complementary rather than primary, which explains women's willingness to work for a lower wage, and helps to explain why women's wages often remain barely above 50 percent of male wages in cases where women's productivity is as high, if not higher, than men's.¹¹

Boserup also hints at the existence of both wage differentials due to job segregation by sex, and labor market hierarchies related to race and nationality as well as gender.¹² Her empirical insights appear to support a theoretical model of fragmented labor markets rather than a model of a competitive labor market, which would suggest a neoclassical framework. Yet Boserup makes no attempt at reconciling her various and apparently contradictory descriptions of wage differentials and hiring practices. Her underlying neoclassical categories do not allow her to integrate her rich empirical observations within a coherent analytical framework. Similar limitations in her analysis result from her assumption of a unique development model.

*Model of Development: Modernization versus Accumulation*¹³

Boserup's general argument is that women workers are marginalized in the process of economic development because their economic gains as wage workers, farmers, and traders are slight compared to those of male workers. Hence, policy efforts should be directed to redress this problem, so that women share more fully in the fruits of modernization. Underlying this is the view that modernization is both beneficial and inevitable in the specific form it has taken in most Third World countries—a notion that has been extensively criticized by radical social scientists over the last two decades.¹⁴ The modernization approach

11. ILO, *passim*.

12. Boserup, pp. 107, 147–51.

13. The modernization approach to economic development is based on a perception of social change as a linear movement from backwardness to modernity. Specifically, it calls for the adaptation of technology, institutions, and attitudes to those existing in the advanced capitalist countries of the West. The theory does not emphasize changes in class relations or the contradictory effects of the capitalist development process, nor does it acknowledge the possibility of alternative development models. In contrast, the capital-accumulation approach analyzes the growth of interconnected processes of production—both quantitative and qualitative—motivated by profits, extension of the market, growing social division of labor and modes of production, and the proletarianization of the labor force. Private ownership of resources, and hence of the surplus generated in production (profits, rent, and interest), leads to class differentiation between owners and nonowners of the means of production. Private ownership also signals the private appropriation of productive wealth, and growing inequalities in the distribution of income and power.

14. Paul Baran, *The Political Economy of Growth* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1959); André G. Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of*

has two negative effects on Boserup's analysis. First, she tends to ignore processes of capital accumulation set in motion during the colonial period, and the effects of such processes on technical change and women's work. Second, she does not systematically analyze the different effects of capital accumulation on women of different classes.

Of the many variants of modernization theory, Boserup's work is one based on technological determinism that uses cultural values as filler for conceptual holes in the analysis. The technological determinism in her argument is clearest in her discussion of indigenous farming systems. For example, though Boserup argues that there is a negative correlation between the use of the plow and the extent of field work done by women, the basis of this correlation is never clarified. Nor does she discuss the possibility that there may be deeper causal reasons for the empirically observed correlation. Instead, one is left to presume that technical variation exercises some mysterious, if powerful, impact on the division of labor by sex. This sort of unexplained correlation is rife in modernization theory. The processes of modernization—in this case, the effect of plow cultivation on women's work—are rarely explained. Rather, the more modern is usually held up as the model against which the more backward is judged. To Boserup's credit, she does not make this last step. Instead she sees modernization operating concurrently with women's loss of economic independence.

However, this insight is not located in any coherent theory, but only in a sharp empirical intuition. Boserup holds cultural prejudices to blame for women's marginalization; overall the process of modernization is viewed as beneficial. Indeed, Boserup regards modernizing technical changes, such as the shift from hoe to plow cultivation, as the inevitable products of population growth.¹⁵ But nowhere does she confront the causes of growing population density, particularly the Malthusian belief that population growth is somehow inherent in human nature.

Viewing the Third World from this perspective involves ignoring effects on population growth and density of the alienation of land and its private appropriation during the colonial period. The direct effects were felt most sharply in regions such as Southern Africa where most of the land (and, inevitably, the best land) was taken over by settlers, squeezing

Chile and Brazil (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967); Samir Amin, *Unequal Development* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976).

15. See Ester Boserup's earlier work, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965). In this book, exogenously given population growth provides the major impetus for technical change in agriculture. Her argument is intended to be anti-Malthusian—rising population density in a region is followed, not by the Malthusian checks of war or famine, but by technological adaptation (shorter fallow, higher cultivation intensity, the shift from hoe to plow) designed to facilitate greater food production.

the indigenous population into shrinking reserves, and leaving high person-to-land ratios.¹⁶ The indirect effects have been felt in most regions where the privatization of land, labor, and subsistence have generated incentives for higher fertility among peasants.¹⁷

Such changes in the social organization of production and in the appropriation of the means of production also have powerful effects on the division of labor by sex and age. What appears to Boserup to be a technically determined correlation between plow cultivation and women's lower participation in field work has its roots in the social relations of production and reproduction. To be sure, Boserup does note that "the plough is used in regions with private ownership of land and with a comparatively numerous class of landless families in the rural population."¹⁸ This, she says, creates the possibility of substituting hired workers, male and female, for the farm wife in field labor. But she does not explain why and through what processes this possibility is realized.

In fact, in her entire discussion of women's agricultural work, Boserup makes a rather artificial separation between women from landed peasant households and women from agricultural labor households. It is not clear why she focuses on the former when defining male and female farming systems, and discusses the latter in another section. Surely the landless women should also be part of the criterion by which a farming system is defined as male or female. This is especially true where women constitute a significant proportion of the agricultural wage-labor force in regions of plow cultivation.¹⁹ In fact, the further along one reads in Boserup's book, the more it appears that the crucial distinguishing feature between African and Asian farming is not, as she suggests, the tools used—hoe versus plow—but the forms of appropriation of land, of surplus, and of women's reproductive capacity. The sexual division of labor is related to these factors.

Similarly, while Boserup discusses the economic roots of polygamy, she fails to examine the process of change in this system as the possibilities of capital accumulation multiply. In some precolonial African communities, a large number of wives gave a man status and possibly a greater voice in the village councils. But women had at least partial control over the product of their labor. With the coming of long-distance trade and private appropriation of land, women's labor could be used to produce a surplus, which formed a basis for accumulation of land and

16. Robert Palmer and Neil Parsons, eds., *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977).

17. Mahmood Mamdani, *The Myth of Population Control* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).

18. Boserup, *Woman's Role*, p. 26.

19. In India, for example, plow cultivation coexists with a wage-labor force in agriculture that is one-third female. See India, Committee on the Status of Women in India, *Towards Equality* (New Delhi, 1974).

wealth.²⁰ In turn, class differentiation began to intensify, women came to have less and less control over the product of their labor, and additional wives became, in fact, simply additional field workers who facilitated the accumulation of use-rights to more land. These changes probably indicated a major alteration in gender relations to the detriment of women. By failing to examine such matters, Boserup's argument remains divorced from any coherent analysis of the interconnections between the social process of accumulation, class formation, and changes in gender relations.

Another example of the work's weak conceptual basis is Boserup's discussion of women's declining status under colonial rule. The biases of modernization theory are evident in her presumption that the introduction of commercial agriculture was generally beneficial, except for the consequent decline in women's status. This presumption ignores entirely the long history of resistance to forced cultivation of crops such as cotton and coffee in Africa and other Third World regions.²¹ Cultivation involving the increased use of land and labor in the production of commercial crops was a major mechanism for the transformation of land relations and class differentiation, and it opened possibilities for exploitation by commercial capital. The active intervention of the colonial state in such cultivation and in attempts to disseminate technological improvements is hardly surprising. The subsistence crops of the local people were not a source of surplus value. Subsistence farming drew the government's attention only under two circumstances: first, whenever the labor and land used for subsistence crops acted as a barrier to the expansion of commercial crops; and second, whenever subsistence production deteriorated to the point where there was excessive migration to the urban areas, or eruptions of political resistance.²²

Teaching the women better techniques in subsistence cropping, as Boserup suggests, would have been like treating cancer with a bandaid. That such teaching did not take place could hardly be the cause of women's worsening situation under conditions of rapid land alienation and class differentiation. Nor is Boserup correct in implying that all men benefited from commercial production. The possibilities of accumulation inherent in commercial farming undoubtedly enabled some men to raise themselves up in the indigenous class hierarchy, but most men did not experience such mobility. The narrow truth of Boserup's thesis is

20. Penelope Ciancanelli, "Exchange, Reproduction, and Sex-Subordination among the Kikuyu of East Africa," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 12, no. 2 (1980): 25-36.

21. A. T. Nzula, I. I. Potekhin, and A. Z. Zusmanovich, *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa*, ed. Robin Cohen, trans. Hugh Jenkins (London: Zed Press, 1979).

22. Henry Bernstein, "African Peasantries: A Theoretical Framework," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 6, no. 4 (1979): 421-43; Judith Van Allen, "Sitting on a Man: Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 6, no. 2 (1972): 165-82.

that while some men could be integrated into the ruling class, almost no women could be, at least on their own. The concentration of women in subsistence farming undeniably caused this unevenness. That commercial cropping came to dominate over subsistence cropping was a product not of European patriarchal culture, but of the process of capital accumulation. Thus, women's loss of status results from the interweaving of class relations and gender relations.

Recent scholarship emphasizes the close connections between processes of accumulation and changes in women's work and in the forms of their subordination. The single most powerful tendency of capitalist accumulation is to separate direct producers from the means of production and to make their conditions of survival more insecure and contingent. This tendency manifests itself in new forms of class stratification in rural areas—between rich peasants and capitalist farmers, on one hand, and poor peasants and landless laborers on the other. Capitalist accumulation can have a variety of effects on women's work depending on the specific form accumulation takes in a particular region.

In some areas, the sexual division of labor may change and women's workload may be intensified. For example, Jette Bukh shows how the concentration of men in commercial crops and male migration to urban areas in search of work have forced women in Ghana to take up additional tasks in subsistence agricultural production, lengthening and intensifying their work day.²³ The pressure on women in these largely female-headed households is aggravated by increased school attendance among their children, which has induced changes in the crops cultivated. For example, women have begun to substitute cassava production for labor-intensive yam production, though cassavas are less nutritious. They have also decreased vegetable production. Furthermore, as land becomes privately appropriated, common sources of water, fuel, and food are lost to poorer peasants and landless laborers, forcing women to spend more time and labor in finding, fetching, and foraging.²⁴

In other areas, women may lose effective control over productive resources and over the labor process and its product. Kate Young describes the changes in the sexual division of labor that resulted from the penetration of merchant capital and its interaction with local capital in the Mexican region of Oaxaca in the 1920s.²⁵ Merchant capital was already taking away women cloth weavers' control of their terms of purchase and sale. The shift from traditional crops to market-oriented coffee production introduced new changes; women's work shifted from weaving to seasonal participation in coffee production. As a result, they

23. Jette Bukh, *The Village Woman in Ghana* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1979).

24. Gita Sen, "Women Workers and the Green Revolution," in Benería, ed.

25. Kate Young, "Sex Specificity in Migration: A Case Study from Mexico," in Benería, ed.

lost control over economic resources and over the labor process, and became secondary and marginal workers in agricultural production.

A third possible effect of capital accumulation involves a new division of labor in which young women become migrant wage earners. The increasing internationalization of capital offers vivid examples of woman's place in the capitalist labor process. Noeleen Heyzer describes the participation of young migrant Malaysian women in the labor-intensive industries of Singapore.²⁶ Migrant workers make up 51 percent of the total manufacturing work force in Singapore, and about 45 percent of the workers in this sector are women working at the bottom levels of the wage structure. Heyzer's analysis illustrates the conditions under which women are becoming important participants in the industrialization process taking place in Third World countries. As Dorothy Elson and Ruth Pearson have pointed out, women's employment is a logical outcome of the increasing fragmentation of capitalist production, in which technology enables industrialists to shift the labor-intensive processes of production to the Third World. Female labor meets the needs of capitalists searching for a disciplined and low-cost labor supply.²⁷ Helen Safa illustrates this point in her discussion of runaway shops in Latin America and Asia, where about 80 percent of the employees are women.²⁸ A common feature of this type of employment is that it is temporary, either because contracts are of limited duration or because there is a high turnover of workers. In addition, working conditions are oppressive. Heyzer describes the prevalent "atmosphere of compulsion" and the alienation of the workers. Safa describes the lack of public transportation, inadequate health care and other social services, and management resistance to unionization.

In some areas, capital accumulation may weaken traditional forms of patriarchal control over women and introduce new forms. Carmen Diana Deere shows how changes from servile to capitalist relations of production in mid-twentieth-century Cajamarca, Peru, loosened patriarchal controls over women's work.²⁹ Increasing male migration to the coastal plantations gave women greater autonomy, but access to land shrank, and a new structure emerged by which women became dependent on male wage earners. Similarly, in Southeast Asia patriarchy within the family has been replaced by a capitalist control that takes very patriarchal forms; young women's lives and sexuality are circumscribed by the firm's labor control policies.

26. Heyzer; Wong.

27. Elson and Pearson.

28. Safa.

29. Carmen Diana Deere, "Changing Social Relations of Production and Peruvian Peasant Women's Work," *Latin American Perspectives* 4, no. 1-2 (1977): 48-69. See also Carmen Diana Deere and Magdalena León de Leal, "Peasant Production, Proletarianization, and the Sexual Division of Labor in the Andes," in this issue.

Finally, class differentiation accompanying the capitalist transformation of a region provides a new basis for differentiation between women. This is well illustrated by Ann Stoler in her study of Javanese women. In analyzing the impact of agricultural change on labor force participation, Stoler states that "for the poorer majority of village society, both men and women suffer as more and more land is concentrated in the hands of the wealthier households. However, the decline in female employment opportunities is more easily observable."³⁰ While Boserup points to the ability of some women from landed households to withdraw from field work when landless laborers are available, she does not point out the implications of this situation for women who are landless laborers. Poor and landless women, for example, are often forced to seek agricultural work despite declining employment opportunities due to mechanization of agriculture.³¹

In brief, these studies show the specific ways in which women are affected by the hierarchical and exploitative structure of production associated with capitalism's penetration in the Third World. Modernization is not a neutral process, but one that obeys the dictates of capitalist accumulation and profit making. Contrary to Boserup's implications, the problem for women is not only the lack of participation in this process as equal partners with men; it is a system that generates and intensifies inequalities, making use of existing gender hierarchies to place women in subordinate positions at each different level of interaction between class and gender. This is not to deny the possibility that capitalist development might break down certain social rigidities oppressive to women. But these liberating tendencies are accompanied by new forms of subordination.

Analysis of Subordination: The Reproductive Sphere

One of the most pervasive themes of the present feminist movement is the emphasis placed on the role of reproduction as a determinant of women's work, the sexual division of labor, and the subordinate/dominant relationships between women and men.³² It is precisely this emphasis that is lacking in Boserup's book. As a result, her analysis does not contain a feminist perspective that speaks directly to the problem of

30. Ann Stoler, "Class Structure and Female Autonomy in Rural Java," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1977): 74-89.

31. Sen.

32. Reproduction here refers not only to biological reproduction and daily maintenance of the labor force, but also to social reproduction—the perpetuation of social systems. Related is the view that in order to control social reproduction (through inheritance systems, for example) most societies have developed different forms of control over female sexuality and reproductive activities. This control is the root of women's subordination.

women's subordination. To be sure, the book is about different forms subordination can take, but it fails to elucidate the crucial role of the household as the focal point of reproduction. Nor does it explain the social relations among household members in the making of "the woman problem" and in determining women's role in economic development.

Boserup's analysis of polygamy in Africa offers an illustration in this regard. Her analysis, as mentioned earlier, is grounded in economic factors, namely, the greater access to land and labor resources provided by each wife. Boserup's interesting insight, however, is not accompanied by an analysis of the significance of this type of household arrangement for the dynamics of male domination. Nor does it explain why polygamy can also be found in Middle Eastern countries where women are secluded and do not represent an addition to land and labor resources. In these cases, polygamy becomes a luxury that not all households can afford. A similar situation can even be found in parts of Africa where women are secluded, such as the Hausa region in northern Nigeria where polygamy has been on the increase during this century.³³ In the Middle East and in the Hausa region polygamy might be related to social reproduction, that is, to the access each wife provides to family networks and resources. Seclusion may be an effort to control female sexuality for the purpose of identifying paternity and transmitting resources from one generation to the next.

Thus Boserup's analysis falls within a traditional approach to women's issues (and it echoes traditional politics). This approach focuses on nondomestic production as a determinant of women's position in society. Consequently, the solution to women's oppression is seen in the sphere of economic and social relations outside the household. Recent feminist analysis points out the shortcomings of this approach, stressing that it is one-sided and does not address itself to the root of patriarchal relations. In the three areas discussed below—domestic work, spheres of production and reproduction, and population and birth control issues—the emphasis on reproduction has contributed to an understanding of women's economic role, of the material base of their oppression, and of its implications for policy and action.

Domestic Work

During the past decade, feminist attempts to understand the roots of women's oppression have resulted in a growing body of literature on domestic labor and household production, as well as on the patriarchal structure that controls them. Most of this literature is based on conditions prevalent in industrialized, urban societies where the nuclear

33. Richard Longhurst, "Resource Allocation and the Sexual Division of Labor: A Case Study of a Moslem Hausa Village in Northern Nigeria," in Beneria, ed.

family has been, until recently, the most basic form of household organization, and wage labor has been the most important source of family subsistence. Under these conditions, the great bulk of domestic work consists of the production of use values through the combination of commodities bought in the market and domestic labor time. The goods and services produced contribute to the reproduction of the labor force and to its daily maintenance. Thus, domestic work performs a crucial role for the functioning of the economic system. It is linked with the market both by way of what it purchases and by what it provides—the commodity labor power that is exchanged for a wage.³⁴ In the average household, this work is done by women and is unpaid. Women's unique responsibility for this work, and their resulting weakness in the labor market and dependency on the male wage, both underlie and are products of asymmetric gender relations.

The form, extent, and significance of domestic work, however, vary according to a society's stage of economic transformation. In a subsistence economy, the materials used for domestic production are not bought in the market; they are transformed in such a way that household and nonhousehold production are closely linked—to the extent that it is hard to draw a line between them. Domestic work extends itself into activities such as gathering wood for the domestic fire, picking vegetables for daily meals, and baking bread in village public ovens for family consumption. Domestic work also becomes part of the agricultural labor process when, for example, the meals for agricultural workers are cooked in the home and transported to the fields. Similarly, the agricultural labor process extends itself into household production, as when cereals are dried and agricultural goods are processed for family consumption.

In agricultural societies, then, the degree of production for the household's own consumption is higher than in societies where a good proportion of home production has become commoditized. In farming areas domestic and agricultural work contribute most to subsistence needs. The African female farming system places the burden of subsistence largely on women. In most cases, despite a clearly defined sexual division of labor, men's and women's work is integrated in time and space. The separation between productive and reproductive activities is often artificial, symbolized, perhaps, by a woman carrying a baby on her back while working in the fields. By contrast, under the wage-labor sys-

34. For an elaboration of these points, see Veronica Beechey, "Some Notes on Female Wage Labor in Capitalist Production," *Capital and Class* 3 (Autumn 1977): 45–66; Terry Fee, "Domestic Labour: An Analysis of Housework and Its Relation to the Production Process," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 8, no. 1 (1976): 1–8; Susan Himmelweit and Simon Mohun, "Domestic Labour and Capital," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 1, no. 1 (1977): 15–31; Maureen Mackintosh, "Domestic Labour and the Household," in *Fit Work for Women*, ed. Sheila Burman (London: Croom Helm, 1979).

tems of industrialized, urban societies, the burden of subsistence falls upon the wage; domestic work transforms the wage into use values consumed in the household. A clear separation between domestic and commodity production exists, and unpaid housework becomes more and more isolated and differentiated from nonhousehold production.

Despite these differences, the extent to which domestic work is performed by women across countries is overwhelming. Women perform the great bulk of reproductive tasks. To the extent that they are also engaged in productive activities outside of the household, they are often burdened with the problems of a "double day." As mentioned earlier, Boserup includes an interesting discussion about the tendency of conventional statistics to underestimate subsistence activities, including domestic labor, which represent a high proportion of women's work. Yet nowhere does she indicate how central women's primary involvement in household activities is to an understanding of their subordination and of their role in the economy.

Reproduction and Production

The emphasis on reproduction and on analysis of the household sphere indicates that the traditional focus placed upon commodity production is insufficient to understand women's work and its roots in patriarchal relations. In order to understand fully the nature of sex discrimination, women's wages, women's participation in the development process, and implications for political action, analysts must examine the two areas of production and reproduction as well as the interaction between them. An example from the field of economics—the internal labor market model of sex differentials in the work force—illustrates this approach.

This model represents a step forward from neoclassical explanations of women's secondary status in the labor market. It focuses on the internal organization of the capitalist firm to explain sex segregation and wage differentials, rather than on factors of supply and demand developed by other models.³⁵ The dynamics of this internal organization tend to foster the formation of job ladders and clusters that create hierarchies among workers. Sex is one factor by which workers can be separated. In this model, occupational segregation, wage differentials, and other types of discrimination by sex are viewed as resulting from the hierarchical and self-regulatory structure of production.

Two policy implications can be drawn from this model. Radical policy would involve elimination of the hierarchical structure of production, perhaps by some form of workers' control and equalization of

35. Francine Blau and Carol Jusenius, "Economists' Approaches to Sex Segregation in the Labor Market," in *Women and the Workplace*, ed. Martha Blaxall and Barbara Reagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

wages. To the extent that this would eliminate or reduce differences among workers, it would tend to eliminate or reduce differences by sex. A less radical policy would involve equal opportunity/affirmative action plans that take the structure of production and the labor hierarchy as given, but would make each job equally accessible to men and women. Both of these policies have a major flaw; they focus only on the structure of production and do not take into consideration women's role in the area of reproduction. If women face a double day and if child-care facilities are not available to them, neither of the two policies is likely to solve fully the problem of women's secondary status in the labor market, given that their participation in paid production is conditioned by their work in and around the household. All of this points out how necessary it is to eliminate discrimination within the reproductive sphere. Domestic work must be shared between women and men, child-care services must become available, and both patriarchal relations and gender stereotyping in the socialization process must be eliminated.

Within the Marxist tradition, it is interesting to note that the Engels thesis does contain an analysis of the interaction between reproduction and production.³⁶ His view of the origins of women's subordination links the productive sphere—the introduction of private property in the means of production and the need to pass it on from one generation to the next—with reproduction, that is, with the need to identify paternity of heirs through the institution of the family and the control of women's sexuality and reproductive activities. The Engels thesis can be projected to situations, such as those prevalent in industrialized societies, where large segments of the population do not own the means of production, but where there still is a hierarchy and class differences within the propertyless classes. It can be argued that to the extent reproduction implies the private transmission of access to resources—education, for example—the need to identify the individual beneficiaries of this transmission remains.³⁷

Engels himself did not extend the analysis in that direction. For him, as for Marx, the production of means of subsistence and the reproduction of human beings are the two fundamental levels of human activity. However, both assumed that the elimination of private property and women's participation in commodity production, made possible by industrialization, would set the preconditions for their emancipation. Thus the initial connection between production and reproduction found in Engels became blurred with the assumption that transformation of

36. Friedrich Engels, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, reprint ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1975).

37. See Lourdes Benería, "Reproduction, Production and the Sexual Division of Labor," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 3, no. 3 (1979): 203–25, for an elaboration of the point. This notion can explain, for example, why sexual mores are less strict among the poor than among middle- and upper-class people in many urban as well as rural areas.

productive structures would automatically erase women's oppression. Traditional Marxist thinking and traditional leftist and liberal politics have followed a similar pattern. The new emphasis on reproduction is the result of the questions posed by feminists; it can be viewed as an elaboration of the simplifications inherent in Engels's initial formulation.

A variety of recent studies on women in Third World countries have focused on the interaction between production and reproduction to analyze women's work. Maria Mies's study of Indian women lace makers in Narsapur, Andhra Pradesh, for example, shows how the seclusion of women has conditioned their participation in nonhousehold production.³⁸ Although lace making is a producing industry geared toward the international market, it is highly compatible with seclusion and domestic work. Women are engaged in lace making as much as six to eight hours a day, in addition to their household chores. Their average daily earnings amount to less than a third of the official minimum wage for female agricultural laborers. This situation persists even though the industry has grown considerably since 1970 and represents a very high proportion of the foreign exchange earnings from handicrafts in the region. Many of the women are the actual breadwinners in their families. Mies argues that this highly exploitative system has in fact led to greater class differentiation within local communities as well as greater polarization between the sexes. The system is made possible by the ideology of seclusion that rigidly confines women to the home, eliminates their opportunities for outside work, and makes them willing to accept extremely low wages. A strict focus on the productive aspects of lace making—this is Boserup's approach—to the exclusion of reproductive aspects, such as seclusion, presents only a partial picture of the nature of women's exploitation.

Population Control and Birth Control

The 1970s were particularly fruitful in highlighting the issues of reproductive freedom in the advanced capitalist countries; movements for abortion rights, safe contraception, and adequate day care, and struggles against sterilization abuse abounded. For women in the Third World, however, the question of reproductive freedom has been complicated by the issue of overpopulation and by opposition to imperialist-dominated programs of population control. This is, of course, also true for poor women from ethnic and racial minority groups who face the threat of sterilization abuse within the advanced capitalist countries. Much of the literature on Third World countries has focused on the question of population control without directly addressing the problem

38. Maria Mies, "The Dynamics of the Sexual Division of Labor and the Integration of Women Into the World Market," in Benería, ed.

of reproductive freedom for women or the possible contradictions between class and gender.³⁹ A feminist perspective can modify the analysis of population growth and control in the Third World.

The concept of reproductive freedom includes the right to bear or not to bear children and, by implication, the right to space childbearing. To the extent that children are potential laborers, or inheritors for the propertied classes, decisions about childbearing affect not only the woman but her entire household. For example, in very poor peasant households that possess little land and are squeezed by usury and rent payments, the labor of children both on and off the peasant farm may be crucial to the ongoing ability of the household to subsist and maintain land. Pronatalist tendencies in rural areas may have a clear economic basis. Even neoclassical economists are becoming increasingly aware of the effect of class-related factors—level of schooling, size of land holdings, and access to technology—on fertility rates.⁴⁰ Marxist writers have shown the conflict between the economic rationality of the individual household and social programs of family planning and population control.⁴¹ This conflict may be expressed in subtle ways, such as ignoring available contraception, or in more overt resistance to programs of forced sterilization. While leftists have correctly opposed forced sterilization and have pointed to the social causes of unemployment—the real population problem—there has been a tendency to ignore a critical aspect of childbearing: it is performed by women.

It is true that decisions about childbearing may affect the survival of the entire household over time; still, the most immediate burden of multiple pregnancies falls on the mother. In conditions of severe poverty and malnutrition where women are also overworked, this can and does take a heavy toll on the mother's health and well-being. The poor peasant household may survive off the continuous pregnancy and ill-health of the mother, which are exacerbated by high infant mortality. The mother's class interests and her responsibilities as a woman come into severe conflict.⁴²

The result of this conflict is that a poor woman's attitude toward birth control, contraception, and even sterilization are likely to be different from those of her husband or mother-in-law. Research on these problems in the Third World should address questions such as: (1) Who makes decisions about childbearing and birth control within rural

39. Martha Gimenez, "Population and Capitalism," *Latin American Perspectives* 4, no. 4 (1977): 5–40; Mamdani; Bonnie Mass, "Puerto Rico: A Case Study of Population Control," *Latin American Perspectives* 4, no. 4 (1977): 66–81.

40. Mark Rosenzweig, "The Demand for Children in Farm Households," *Journal of Political Economy* 85, no. 1 (1977): 123–46.

41. Mamdani.

42. Nancy Folbre, "Patriarchy and Capitalism in New England, 1650–1900" (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts, 1979), and "Patriarchy in Colonial New England," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 12, no. 2 (1980): 4–13.

households, families, and communities, and on what basis are the decisions made? (2) What indigenous forms of family limitation are available to poor women, and how are they used? (3) Are there differences of opinion and interest between the childbearers and other family members? (4) How does childbearing affect women's participation in other activities?

Answers to these questions require careful empirical research of a sort that is barely beginning in the Third World. The insights gained from empirical research must affect one's assessment of birth control programs, especially the more enlightened programs that focus on the health and education of the mother. The reduction in infant mortality, improvement in health and sanitation, and better midwife and paramedic facilities can give poor, rural women more options than having to resolve class contradictions through their own bodies. Such programs, however, clearly cannot be a panacea for the basic problems of extreme poverty and inequality in land holding; the contradictions of class and capital accumulation in the countryside can be resolved only through systemic social change.

Conclusion

In our analysis we have assessed the positive contributions of Boserup's work to a decade of feminist research on women in the Third World. We have also tried to show the limitations of her analysis, which arise from a flawed and inadequate conceptual basis.⁴³ There has been a great deal of fruitful research in the past decade that is thoroughly grounded in theory, particularly in class-based and feminist perspectives, which provides a richly textured understanding of the position of women in the Third World.

It is very important to delineate the policy implications that emerge from this analysis. Boserup's own conclusions on policy emphasized women's education as the major mechanism by which modernization would begin to work to women's advantage. Through education, women can compete more successfully in urban labor markets and gain access to improved agricultural techniques in the rural areas. This conclusion ignores two crucial features that an analysis based on the concepts of accumulation and women's role in reproduction would highlight. On one hand, it ignores the high incidence of unemployment among educated people in the Third World. Unless the systemic causes of un-

43. For an earlier critique of Boserup's discussion of farming systems, see Suellen Huntington, "Issues in Woman's Role in Economic Development: Critique and Alternatives," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 37, no. 4 (1975): 1001-12. See also Elisabeth Croll, "Socialist Development Experiences: Women in Rural Production and Reproduction in the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and Tanzania," in this issue.

employment are removed, women's education by itself is purely an individualist solution; it attempts to alter the characteristics of individual women rather than those of the system of capital accumulation. On the other hand, even if there were dramatic systemic changes, education by itself would not alter women's position, in that education cannot address issues of child care and domestic work. The high incidence of the double day in countries like the Soviet Union and China supplies ample evidence of this policy's limited success.

Short-term programs involving the basic-needs strategy have definite motivational limits, but they cannot be ignored entirely.⁴⁴ Since the principal outcome of tensions between gender and class are that women are overworked and in ill health, systems of water provision, electrification, and sanitation and health are immediately beneficial. One must remain aware, however, of how such programs are implemented and whom they benefit. Strategies that involve the self-organization of poor women for control over such programs are crucial.

The long-term goal, however, remains, and that is the elimination of class and sex hierarchies through a radical transformation of society, a struggle that requires not only an analysis of class and of accumulation, but a recognition of the importance of reproduction at all levels. We can no longer ignore the questions of what goes on within households, nor the interweaving of gender relations and class relations. The feminist analysis of the Third World in the past decade has lent support and clarity to this vision.

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44. For a clarification of the basic-needs strategy, see ILO, *Employment, Growth and Basic Needs: A One-World Problem* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976).