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FROM STRUCTURAL SUBORDINATION TO EMPOWERMENT: Women and Development in Third World Contexts

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This article argues that the condition of women in Third World societies cannot be separated from the colonial experience since the power relationships that were established during the colonial era between Europe and its territories, and between women and men, have not varied significantly and are still recreated through contemporary mechanisms. For example, development projects promoted by Western countries to modernize the Third World have, in the long run, better served their own interests than those of their intended beneficiaries. As a result and contrary to expectations, growth and prosperity still elude the Third World. We also show that during the current international economic crisis, women's unpaid or underpaid labor has become the basis of new development programs and policies and is crucial to the recent phase of capitalist development. We discuss how the structural position and status of women and colonies closely resemble each other and have served as the foundations of the capital accumulation process and the development of industrial nations. The concept of women as a last colony thus becomes a compelling metaphor of liberation and leads us to stress the need for a worldwide process of gender decolonization, entailing the reformulation of power relations between women and men.

Understanding the history of Third World societies requires the fundamental recognition of their incorporation and survival into a global capitalist system of material and social relations in which the subordination of women has always been ideologically conceived as an integral part of the natural order and perpetuated by cultural praxis, religion, education, and other social institutions. It also entails drawing on the continuities of power relations...

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rooted and molded in the era of European colonial expansion and examining
the set of socioeconomic and political practices that the dominant nations
developed for their acquired overseas colonies almost 500 years ago. On the
surface, the era of the conquistadores represents a thing of the past far
different from today’s multinational corporations, monopoly capital, and
international division of labor. Nonetheless, it is not a far-fetched comparison
if we consider which nations were the masters of the old colonial economic
order and which nations control today’s global economy.

Studying the condition of Third World women, therefore, cannot be
separated from the colonial experience since, historically, the exploitation of
both women and colonies has been fundamental to the global system of
capital accumulation, and sexism and patriarchy are part of its embedded
ideology (Etienne and Leacock 1980; Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, and
Werlhof 1988; Saffioti 1978). Women in developed nations and colonial men
and women share a social structural position: They are appropriated, con-
trolled, and placed in subordinate positions of dependency by those who own
the means of production and dominate access to capital.

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World have, in the long run, better served their own interests than those of
their intended beneficiaries. As a result, contrary to expectations, growth and
prosperity still elude the Third World. In the current international economic
crisis, we also show that it is women’s unpaid or underpaid labor that is at
the core of new development programs and policies and is crucial to this
phase of capitalist development.

Most authors cannot refer to the Third World without alluding to its
conflictive historical, socioeconomic, and political experience. These re-
regions are the dramatic setting for encounters between the powerful and the
subjugated, the poor and the wealthy, the traditional and modern, the rural
and urban. They exemplify class antagonism, oppression, and exploitation at
their worst, since nowhere are the differences and separations between the
privileged and the dispossessed, the White and the non-White, and men
and women so vehemently and persistently expressed and felt. The over-
generalized nature of these dichotomies emphasizes the risks of discussing
the Third World without enough qualification and attention to its complex
mesh of problems and divergent national needs. Nonetheless, rather than
concentrating on the subtleties and textures of the wide-ranging differences
among nations, our main objective in this article is to provide a more comprehensive feminist framework for extracting those patterns that specify and define the alarming socioeconomic condition of women in developing countries.

Sen and Grown (1987, 28-29) have convincingly argued that despite the apparent differences in patterns and consequences of development among the Third World nations, actual differences are minimal. They identify a narrow spectrum of patterns and processes that bind these countries together: their unfavorable structural position in the world economy; their economic vulnerability to the changes in the world market and flows of capital; their internal inequalities in income, employment, land tenure, and control of resources; and their populations' destitution and lack of basic necessities, such as food, housing, health, and other essential services.

In addition to these structural features, found in varying degrees in all Third World nations, there are other factors that continue to aggravate their position of relative disadvantage when compared to the industrialized nations of the West. Etienne and Leacock (1980, 17) have underscored the importance of also considering "the particular mode of colonization, itself determined by the political and economic imperatives of the colonizer and the nature of the colonized society; the precise strategies of exploitation employed by the colonizer; and the strategies of accommodation or resistance adopted by the colonized." Within the remarkable convergences that can be found throughout diverse colonial contexts, this interplay of variables makes each colonial experience unique.

UNDERSTANDING THIRD WORLD DEVELOPMENT

Development is an all-encompassing word used to summarize the overriding concerns and aspirations of advanced capitalist nations and their international agencies in undertaking initiatives and generating responses to a whole range of critical problems faced by what are categorized as the poor, "underdeveloped" countries of the world. These chronic conditions include famine and malnutrition, displacement and homelessness, unemployment and underemployment, disease and mortality, the destruction of the environment, and political repression and violence. Such conditions determine the levels of internal conflict and government stability in the most impoverished areas of the globe, and thus, the relationships these nations maintain with the developed countries. These survival problems remain as historical constants of Third World existence, the outcome of the cumulative effects of the predatory, unequal relationship maintained for centuries between two tre-
mendously disparate worlds. It has been accurately noted that "development would not exist without underdevelopment, wealth would not exist without poverty, and the domination of men would not exist without the subjection and submissiveness of women" (Mies 1988, 3).

The development policies promoted by Western nations have thus been grounded on the notion that the world is divided as follows: the highly developed and more advanced capitalist industrial nations of the First World, the opposing socialist nations of the Second World, and the less developed (or developing) poor agricultural countries of the Third World. Another common distinction between the First and Third World is the hemispheric division between the core countries of the North and the peripheral countries of the South. Behind these stratified views of the world is the claim that Western societies represent the ideal form of cultural, socioeconomic, and political development for Third World countries to emulate if they are to achieve progress, prosperity, and democracy. The antithesis of civilized Europe vis-à-vis its primitive colonial subjects has left us a legacy of unequal power relations and ideological paradigms that presuppose the natural inferiority of the Third World.

The old argument of dependence theorists (Gunder Frank 1969; Jalée 1964) who claimed that discussion of a Third World is intended to hide the imperialism of exploiting and exploited nations still has validity. The term, Third World, may wrongly imply that so many diverse countries constitute a particular entity or a world in themselves, separate from the capitalist and socialist worlds. The Third World is actually a cluster of nations that are predominantly former colonial possessions of the present-day industrialized nations, and therefore have always been integrated into the capitalist system of accumulation. The term Third World also tends to mask the neocolonial relations that currently prevail between industrialized nations and their former colonial territories (Gunder Frank 1969). Nevertheless, it is now a commonly accepted term, no longer to be viewed as the lower tier in a vertical ranking system, but instead as a subverting and resisting nonaligned force (Minh-ha 1989).

Not surprisingly, most of the development strategies and policies for the Third World have been formulated from the ideological and economic perspectives and interests of industrialized countries. They are generally applied across the board, with scant attention to specific national needs and realities of the territories they are intended to transform. Their overall failure is frequently attributed to the remnants of archaic forces that still loom over Third World countries and supposedly keep them suspended in time, rather than to the misguided nature of the projects. In reality, the Third World's
continued profound internal inequalities, inability to meet the basic needs of its population, and unfavorable and vulnerable position in the international economy, which is exacerbated by its current foreign-debt problem, dispute the paternalistic tenets of most development policies. Although in recent years development agencies have attempted to be more attentive to specific national needs, they are far from discarding profit-centered development in favor of people-centered programs. For their part, many developing countries are making concerted efforts to examine development on their own terms, in the hope that they can enhance the living conditions of larger segments of their poverty-stricken populations.

Historically, most development programs and policies have assumed that rapid industrialization and modernization would promote economic growth and reduce poverty in the Third World. A secondary assumption was that modernization and economic development would also result in political democracy. The degree of success or failure of these programs was then measured by increases in indices of modernization: gross national product, per capita income, literacy rates, life expectancy, and fertility rates, rather than on the disappearance of authoritarian or dictatorial regimes. In fact, the prevalence of dictatorships even in the countries that have achieved a relative degree of economic development has discredited the assumed connection between development and democracy.

Industrialization and modernization projects have tended to rely on foreign investment, commercialization, and manufacturing for export rather than local consumption (Sen and Grown 1987). As a result, the development process has meant, to a large extent, the "denationalizing" of many Third World economies, because foreign industrial capital frequently interferes with or restricts the autonomy of local governments, as well as the capacity of national industries to compete in the world market. In addition, in order to promote their economies, Third World countries frequently become dependent on single-commodity export trade, leaving them extremely vulnerable to the fluctuations and perils of world markets. Such dependent, rather than self-sufficient, development strategies have been the norm rather than the exception.

One of the best examples of the failure of the industrialization-modernization model as the panacea for development has been Puerto Rico. The island, which has been a colonial possession of the United States since 1898, was heavily industrialized in the 1950s under Operation Bootstrap, a labor-intensive development program based on U.S. investment in manufacturing industries in return for low-waged labor and corporate tax exemptions that turned Puerto Rico into the export platform for U.S. manufacturing. By the 1970s,
the island had lost most of its competitive advantages as it became more integrated into the U.S. economy, and wages, energy, and commercial transportation costs increased.

In accord with the development model, the industrialization of Puerto Rico created a modern infrastructure with a concomitant improvement in per capita income, literacy and educational rates, life expectancy, new occupational opportunities, and increased consumption of U.S. goods. However, the subordination of the Puerto Rican economy to U.S. corporate interests also produced massive population displacements resulting in one-third of the total population living off the island. Other negative effects have been a perennial unemployment rate of over 15 percent and increased dependency on federal funds for welfare programs such as food stamps, which currently cover at least 50 percent of the population.

Palmira Rios's case study, "Export-Oriented Industrialization and the Demand for Female Labor: Puerto Rican Women in the Manufacturing Sector, 1952-1980," illustrates how Operation Bootstrap was a pioneering model for the export-led industrialization now found in many other developing nations. Although local governments of developing countries try to promote male-dominated industries, which they see as providing more stable jobs and higher wages than those in which women workers predominate, the foreign labor needs of multinationals are being met primarily by women. This contradiction is the focus of Rios's article.

Development policies and projects that are implemented from above, without careful consideration to national infrastructures, internal human and natural resources, or needs for reform, can have disastrous effects on Third World populations. Agricultural development, for instance, without the precondition of agrarian reform and more equitable land distribution, has tended to benefit wealthy landowners rather than poor peasants. Moreover, it has often provoked peasant migration from rural areas to towns and cities, disrupting the lives of families and entire communities. In some areas of Latin America, it is the women who have been driven out of agricultural pursuits and forced to migrate, while in some African countries, men left the agricultural work to the women and moved to towns and cities in search of jobs (Boserup 1970).

GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT

A quick glance at international data will immediately demonstrate that almost without exception, women everywhere in the world are worse off than men. On the whole, women have less power and money and more work and
responsibility (Seager and Olson 1986, 7). When the United Nations pro-
claimed International Women's Year, the data it released showed that women
were performing two-thirds of the world's work and receiving only 10
percent of all income, while owning only 1 percent of the means of produc-
tion (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1989b). The picture becomes even more distress-
ing when we consider the enormous socioeconomic disparities between First
and Third World nations. While First World nations constitute only one-
fourth of the world's population they receive four-fifths of the income
(Brandt Report 1980). However, even within First World nations, women,
relative to the men of their class and racial ethnic group, also tend to be
disadvantaged.

The international call for integrating women into development made in
1975 was more a denunciation of the male-oriented biases in development
policies and the invisibility to which official agencies had relegated women's
participation than an acknowledgment that women had not been a part of the
development process, as indeed, they had been. The pervasive idea that men
were the primary earners frequently led to the formulation of development
policies that excluded or diminished women's productive roles and thus their
status, or added extra hours to their double burden when they had to replace
men engaged in wage labor in the subsistence activities that had previously
been performed collectively.

It is impossible to address the woman question in developing countries
without recognizing that it is inextricably linked to the global capitalist-
patriarchal model of accumulation and hence to the colonial question (Mies
1988; Saffioti 1978). Although it is not always self-evident, both women and
colonies have served as the foundations of industrial development of the
economically dominant Western nations.

Colonialism, a creature born in the fifteenth century—the gateway to
discovery, exploration, and conquest—was to become the mainspring of
European industrial development. Since the "discovery" of their existence
by European settlers, territories first in the New World, and centuries later in
Africa and Asia, have served as the major sources of precious metals, labor,
raw materials, and food products to support the commerce, consumption, and
economic development of what are today's industrialized nations. The basis
for the ascendancy of capitalism in Europe was the process of colonial
exploitation of overseas territories, and although the nature of colonization
varied from one region of the world to another, the system was based on
extracting the wealth of the new lands by using the labor of both the
subjugated indigenous populations and the displaced African slaves to sup-
port the lavish excesses of European aristocracies and the consuming needs
of a rising bourgeoisie (Etienne and Leacock 1980; Saffioti 1978). The wealth
and natural resources of the colonies were the essence of European mercantilist capitalism and, at a later stage, of its industrial revolution. The manufactured goods produced in European factories with the colonies’ raw materials found their way back into colonial markets. This cycle has perpetuated itself through the centuries.

In the Americas another colonial power would emerge to substitute for the Spanish, as the United States consolidated itself in the nineteenth century through the pursuit of its Manifest Destiny policies of territorial expansion and the Monroe Doctrine (1825), postulated to reduce European influence in the hemisphere. After its Civil War (1861-65), the United States was determined to become the new major economic and geopolitical power in the American continent.

In the twentieth century, as capitalism entered its monopolist stage of development, colonialism has served to link the colonizing and colonized countries into a global economic network. The unequal relationship, established in many cases centuries ago, that has kept Third World nations subordinate and dependent, helps explain the continuing internal turmoil and clamor for change coming out of most of these regions today.

It is quite evident in the colonial literature that from the beginnings of their imperial expansionism, Europeans, particularly missionaries and official authorities, had very little regard for any patterns of communal and egalitarian relationships among the native populations subjugated in conquest. In many precolonial societies, women’s position and participation in productive activities were parallel to those of men, rather than subservient (Etienne and Leacock 1980; Saffioti 1978). The imposition of European patriarchal relationships that presupposed the universal subordination of women in many instances deprived native women of property and personal autonomy and restricted the productive functions and any public roles they might have played prior to colonization (Etienne and Leacock 1980; Nash 1980; Saffioti 1978).

The undercutting of women’s rights and productive contributions has continued through the centuries, as colonial territories were integrated into the capitalist system of production, and persisted even after those countries gained independence because of the neocolonial relations that the dominant industrialized nations maintain with developing countries. The internal colonialism (Blauner 1972) that later emerged within Western societies, wherein ethnic and racial minorities are relegated to a structurally marginal position, replicates the patterns of colonial relationships.

Prior to the work of Boserup (1970), most of the classical development literature tended to ignore women’s economic role and contributions. Assuming women were passive dependents, the literature relegated them to repro-
ductive rather than productive roles, confining them to a domestic sphere they undervalued and viewed as isolated from the rest of the social structure. Little attention was paid to differences in productivity between women and men in different developing nations or to women’s labor activities in the informal economy.

One of Boserup’s major contributions was to establish empirically the vital role of women in agricultural economies and to recognize that economic development, with its tendency to encourage labor specialization, was actually depriving women of their original productive functions and on the whole deteriorating their status. Acknowledged by many as a path breaker in the field of women and development (Beneria 1982; Bolles 1988; Sen and Grown 1987), Boserup is also credited with documenting the existence of a gendered division of labor across nations and with showing that women’s labor had not been reported in official records.

Shortcomings in Boserup’s important work stem from her adherence to the modernization approach so prevalent at the time, which, as we have seen, reflected policies that encouraged the diffusion of capitalism. Boserup also did not pay enough attention to women’s household labor as a basis for subordination, nor to the effects of capital accumulation in colonial settings on different groups (Benería and Sen 1981; Bolles 1988). Since Boserup’s initial work, numerous studies at local, national, and international levels have documented the impact of development on women and confirmed their segregation in labor that generates the lowest wages and prestige.

Among the best recent studies are those by Beneria (1982) and Deere and León (1982, 1987), describing the meaning and impact of development for rural women in Latin America and the Caribbean. Benería (1982, 135) has emphasized the need to “counteract the ideological underevaluation of women’s work” by arguing for the inclusion of use-value as well as exchange-value production in defining active labor. She refers to the whole gamut of women’s activities as ways of “making a living,” rather than “earning a living,” an approach that highlights the need to include a multiplicity of daily survival activities performed by Third World women that are otherwise excluded because they are not waged work (also see Bose 1987).

Deere’s model of “tiers of interaction” (in Bolles 1988) considers the impact of the macrosystem on different structural layers down to the household and individual units of production. She thus establishes the effects that changes in the international economy have on national economies and social relations of developing countries. When looking at the status of rural women, Deere and León (1982, 1987) have concluded that in the division between productive and reproductive activities in Latin America, they bear a heavier burden than urban women, but the gendered division of labor within the
productive sector is extremely heterogeneous. They thus confirm that overall, the process of development has multivaried effects on rural men and women.

One result of the conceptual evolution in the study of women and development is that feminist researchers are now paying attention to those previously ignored sectors of working women who are essential to Third World economies. For instance, historical studies on the colonial experience are beginning to examine the contribution of African slave women in both the productive and reproductive spheres (Morrissey 1989). In other studies, Chaney and García Castro (1989, 6) describe the contemporary search of household domestic workers in Latin America and the Caribbean for a class identity. These women are demanding both respect for their labor and legal recognition of their rights. The authors argue they are striving for identification as workers rather than as muchachas (sewing girls).

Another good example is Bunster and Chaney’s (1989) compelling study of rural, mostly indigenous women in Peru who migrate to the cities and towns, where they find their greatest employment opportunities are as street vendors and servants, two occupations that, in the case of Latin America, account for one-third of all employed women (p. 10). Feminist research like this has entailed the use of innovative, interdisciplinary approaches and techniques to collect data that were not considered by traditional development researchers and that challenge the patriarchal model of Western scholarship.

Based on such studies, we can see why the feminist critique of development paradigms has been a major factor in the emergence of women’s studies as a field of academic inquiry in Third World higher-education institutions during the 1980s, particularly the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. A significant body of scholarship and programmatic initiatives has been emerging despite limited institutional resources and support, bureaucratic barriers, and the quasi-“subversive” character and implications of feminism that, in these countries, is often regarded as a Western penetration that threatens traditional cultural values and gender roles.

WOMEN AND THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CRISIS

Beyond the common Third World problems outlined by Sen and Grown (1987), which include extreme poverty and inequality both at national and international levels, Third World nations confront a significant number of new issues. Perhaps the most acute are the perennial foreign debt, rampant national levels of inflation, and the continuous migration of native populations from rural areas to towns and cities or across national borders to
industrialized countries, both legally or as undocumented workers. Whether these problems are solved, contained, or worsened is dependent on the power, interference, and relentless presence of multinational corporations that continue to subordinate Third World countries' national interests to their own growth and profit margins. The much-needed internal political and socioeconomic reforms have been hard to achieve, as the ruling oligarchies of many developing nations ally themselves with those of Western nations.

In recent decades, the impact of the cyclical crises of global capitalism has become more evident in Third World nations, and in some regional areas, such as Latin America during the 1980s, the economic crisis has affected the survival potential of both authoritarian and democratic regimes. It was a major factor in bringing down military, repressive governments in Argentina and Chile, while derailing the social and democratic reform aspirations of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua (Stallings and Kaufman 1989).

According to Nash and Fernández-Kelly (1983), the current international crisis, compared by some to the Great Depression, reflects a new relationship between less-developed and highly industrialized countries based on the geographic dispersion of the various stages of manufacturing production by large corporations. Attracted by low-cost labor, tax exemptions, and lax production restrictions, transnational corporate capital is radically altering the worldwide work force. These changes are also causing substantial transformations of families and community structures.

Nash (1983) notes that the growing integration of the world system of production is no longer based on the exploitation of primary sources but on offshore production, or the transfer of assembly plants, primarily in electronics, apparel, and textiles, from core to peripheral countries. She shows how industrial plant closings and decline in blue-collar employment in the United States is linked to the emergence of a new, cheaper industrial force in the Third World, now in direct competition with the First World labor force.

Fernández-Kelly (1983) shows many of the hidden aspects of offshore production as it occurs in “export processing zones” (EPZs). Using the presence of maquiladoras (subsidiaries of multinational corporations) on the U.S.-Mexico border, Fernández-Kelly confirms that these industries are encouraging the use of young women’s labor. As a development strategy, the maquiladoras exacerbate unemployment and underemployment and increase gender segregation in the labor force. Women’s alternatives are not substantially improved because these companies offer no job security, minimal possibilities for advancement, and frequently expose workers to hazardous working conditions. Instead, they have contributed to the growing proletarianization of Third World women, aptly described as working on the “global assembly line.”
This new international economic order has had considerable economic and political impact on Third World nations, since it keeps them at the mercy of external economic interests who determine what and how they will produce. To worsen an already detrimental situation, these multinational corporations frequently generate economic havoc by moving their operations to a new port with more advantageous incentives when their "industrial peace" is threatened by labor activism or when they seek increased profit margins.

One continuing concern of both the developing and advanced capitalist nations is the increasing amount of women's poverty worldwide. The attention that has been paid to the "feminization of poverty" during the current economic crisis is partly due to the women's movement around the world. As June Nash, in "Latin American Women in the World Capitalist Crisis," and Helen Safa, in "Women's Collective Action in Latin America," show, poor women use their responsibilities as mothers and domestic workers, not only to enter the formal and informal economy, but as the basis for political demands. Their organizing and demonstrations on behalf of the survival of their children and families has made them as potentially explosive as the former colonies in which they live.

**WOMEN AS A LAST COLONY**

The conceptualization of women as a last colony, advanced by the work of German feminist scholars (Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Werlhof 1988) has provided a valuable interpretative model, already implicitly used by many researchers. This framework underscores the interactions of race, class, and gender without fragmenting these issues and recognizes one complex but coherent system of oppression. It also allows us to see that the patterns of sexism are further compounded by a simultaneous layer of oppression that Third World men and women share as a result of the colonizing experience.

Werlhof (1988a, 25) argues that the relationship of Third World subsistence workers of both genders to First World multinationals closely resembles the relationship between men and women worldwide. Women and colonies are both low-wage and non-wage producers, share structural subordination and dependency, and are overwhelmingly poor. Werlhof contends that in response to its accumulation crisis, capitalism is now acknowledging that the labor of women as domestic workers goes beyond the reproductive sphere into the production of commodities. She claims that housewives in the developed societies and small peasants in the colonial countries have been
excluded from what is defined as economy as a necessary precondition to the predominance of the White male wage worker. Out of this analysis, Mies (1988, 7) pinpoints three tiers in the capitalist pyramid of exploitation: the holders of capital; wage workers (mostly White men); and non-wage workers (mostly women), housewives, and subsistence producers in the colonial countries (men and women).

Using this model, both Werlhof (1988a) and Bennholdt-Thomsen (1988a) describe a new trend leading to the disappearance of the classical proletariat (i.e., the second tier of White male wage workers), whose labor is increasingly being replaced by what they characterize as the “housewifization” (Hausfrauuisierung) of labor, namely labor that exhibits the major characteristics of housework. Of course, this housewife role entails different things across nations, ranging from cooking, cleaning, washing, and taking care of children and the elderly, to grinding maize, carrying water, or plowing the family plot. The determining factor is always whether or not these tasks are performed for money. Werlhof (1988b, 173) establishes a link between the work performed by women and that of Third World populations when she concludes that the classical proletariat, the pillar of capitalist production, is disappearing and being replaced by the Third World worker and the housewife as the new “pillar of accumulation.”

Men, in effect, have colonized women by the “housewifization” of their work (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1988a, 1988b; Werlhof 1988a, 1988b); in other words, by isolating women in the domestic sphere and devaluing the work they perform there; by ideologically justifying it as a genetic predisposition based on their capacity for motherhood; by regarding any type of income they generate as supplementary or secondary, thus ascribing a lower status to their occupations; and ultimately, by controlling their sexuality. The contention that the present-day world economic crisis is not just another cyclical crisis, but rather a new phase of capitalist development relying on “feminized” forms of labor (i.e., doing any kind of work at any time, unpaid or poorly paid), is supported by the efforts of the industrialized powers to force Third World nations to “restructure” or adapt their national economies to the needs of the world system for such labor (Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Werlhof 1988).

Bennholdt-Thomsen (1988a, 61) confirms the practical outcomes now occurring as capitalists come to view non-wage labor as a means of extracting surplus value. In a detailed analysis of current World Bank policy, she has found that powerful development agencies have made use of the profitability of non-waged peasantry in Third World countries by granting them credits for small-scale production, drawing peasants increasingly from subsistence
to commercial production. This development policy, promoted by the World Bank since the early 1970s, claims to attack absolute poverty through "investment in the poor" (p. 51). The real yield, however, has been increased profits for the agency from loans to the poor and increased external control over peasant subsistence work and resources. As Bennholdt-Thomsen (1988b, 158) points out, development policy is now in the hands of "a gigantic centralized apparatus of planning and administration." Any new policy trends are more deliberately aimed at certain sectors of the population—most recently, women and peasants—although the responses of those groups are not always the anticipated ones.

Women are not passive victims in this process; instead, they are developing creative ways in which to resist the new forms of subordination. These various types of resistance, solidarity, and collective action are the prime foci of the articles in this special issue.

**WOMEN ORGANIZING FOR CHANGE**

Nash considers Latin American women’s subsistence activities as peasant producers to be similar to the unpaid housework of women in Europe and the United States; however, the resultant political strategies have been different. In the United States and other developed industrial countries, women, as individuals or as family members, bear the costs of economic crises. In the First World countries, they have responded to cutbacks in government services to families by entering the paid labor force, especially in the service industry, and by taking over the tasks of elder care and child care.

In Latin America, while some women do take jobs in export-processing zones or enter the service sector, the vast majority respond to the breakdown of their subsistence economy by organizing collective meals, health cooperatives, mothers’ clubs, neighborhood water-rights groups, or their own textile and craft collectives, which produce goods both for street vending and for international markets. Thus, rather than privatizing their survival problems, Latin American women collectivize them and form social-change groups based on social reproduction concerns. In these terms, the political discourse and arena of struggle is not worker exploitation and control of the means of production, but rather moral persuasion to place demands on the state for rights related to family survival. Using examples from five different Latin American countries, Nash illustrates the varieties of women’s collective strategies.
While Nash explores the origins of Latin American women’s collective strategies for family economic and social survival, Safa focuses on their goals and likelihood of success. She argues that as the public-private split in women’s lives breaks down, their collective actions target demands directly at the state, rather than at corporate employers through unions or through political parties. Women demand public services such as running water, electricity, or transportation for squatter communities; organize self-help collectives to buy and prepare food or to provide child care for a neighborhood; or fight for human rights in the names of the “disappeared” relatives who were victimized by repressive regimes.

Latin American activists contend that their traditional roles as wives and mothers are the basis for such collective actions on behalf of their families. Although these groups are composed of poor women, they do not organize either explicitly on a class basis or at the workplace but instead at a neighborhood level around a broad list of issues that they redefine as women’s concerns. Safa feels this approach is distinct from European or U.S. women’s movements, which she sees as seeking participation in the public sphere based on the elimination of most gender distinctions.

Why are these Latin American women’s movements unique? First, it is evident that women in peripheral capitalist countries are facing economic conditions different from those in the core. Second, as Safa points out, women in Latin America have generally avoided partisan politics because it remains primarily a male sphere, and political parties rarely address women’s issues. Third, poor women’s economic movements have often developed from and been supported by the church through ecclesiastical base communities that do not challenge women’s traditional roles. Fourth, occupational segregation, wage disadvantages in the labor market, and the presumed supplementary nature of their income has prevented Third World women from developing consciousness of themselves as workers. Nevertheless, declining fertility and increasing female education and labor force participation may ultimately change this last factor.

Safa also evaluates the potential success of this collective, gender-based strategy in various Latin American countries. She finds that human rights groups have more difficulty than those based on neighborhood consumer issues in outliving the immediate crisis that generated them. Concomitantly, stable grass-roots organizations survive longer than those that have been used by military governments for partisan purposes or that are created from above in socialist countries. Yet, women’s needs are no longer ignored anywhere. As long as they focus their organizing around domestic issues, they are not seen as a threat. However, as their gender interests expand into traditional
power arenas, they will represent a force that, increasingly, must be con-
tended with.

Norma Chinchilla, in “Revolutionary Popular Feminism in Nicaragua: 
Class, Gender, and National Sovereignty,” and Iris Berger, in “Gender, Race, 
and Political Empowerment: South African Canning Workers, 1940-1960,” 
provide case studies of women’s specific collective actions in socialist 
Nicaragua and capitalist South Africa, respectively.

Counter to Safa’s argument about the tendency of women’s social move-
ments to demobilize after a revolution has succeeded, Chinchilla contends 
that women’s collective activity can be sustained if two conditions are met. 
First, the revolutionary leadership must take on the issue of sexism in its own 
theory and practice. Second, women’s activism must continue both outside 
and within the revolutionary party. In particular, the original forms of 
organizing around women’s “practical gender interests” must be politicized 
and transformed into “strategic gender interests” that are articulated with 
class, race, ethnicity, and national identity issues and challenge women’s 
subordination.

In support of her perspective, Chinchilla provides a detailed description 
of the changing stages of the Nicaraguan women’s movement. Why were the 
Sandinista front and Nicaragua government willing to make these ideological 
shifts? Chinchilla indicates that their form of “new Marxism” was both more 
pragmatic and more pluralistic than that of the Cubans. They recognized the 
danger that women would be co-opted by rightist parties. Moreover, women’s 
participation in the revolution itself had been significant, creating legitimacy 
for their demands and placing them in powerful positions. At the same time, 
the vast numbers of female-headed households resulting from the war with 
the Contras represented a significant constituency in need of gender-based 
reforms.

Although Safa’s and Chinchilla’s arguments may seem different, both 
agree that successful gender-based organizing must focus its demands on the 
state and not be co-opted by it. They also concur that changes in sexist 
practice and ideology can be obtained during economic crises—an experi-
ence quite different from that of First World feminists, whose achievements 
in the core capitalist countries were made in the context of improving material 
conditions. Instead, the difference between our authors lies in focus: Safa 
otes that most Latin American women’s organizing has been on domestic 
issues rather than explicit class concerns, while Chinchilla shows how 
women’s movements that began from the top down can be refocused to 
challenge the state to help transform women’s roles.

Berger’s case study of the food and canning industry in the South African 
Cape area during the 1940s and 1950s also shows impoverished women
actively engaged in improving their living conditions. However, in this example, women engaged in struggles at the workplace, serving in disproportionately large numbers as union leaders and activists. Berger’s analysis explores the conditions under which women’s collective action might skip the “practical gender interests” stage and move directly to challenging both corporate owners and the state.

She first considers the structural factors. In the Cape canning industry, whole families, including wives, husbands, and children, often worked in the same factories, resulting in little split between work and community life. Thus, there was less male-female social differentiation than is found in many Third World countries. Furthermore, women were employed predominantly in seasonal labor, allowing them to take more risks than their men did. Then she shows that as the only available working-class organization, the cannery workers’ union was committed to addressing community issues as well as factory problems—a strategy rarely found. This had two consequences: Women had a reason to stay involved during the off-season, and gender concerns were redefined as group issues. For example, the drive for limits on night work and overtime was fought for both women and men, and maternity benefits were seen as necessary to ease the lives of women workers who had no choice but to combine paid work and family life. Finally, the left-oriented union was influenced by the political climate of an active multiracial nationalist movement. The union fought being segmented into Black and Colored components and, most important, organized resistance to the new imposition of passes on women.

One significant result of these economic and political features is that they synthesize race, class, and gender interests. Among the cannery workers, Black and Colored alike, race differences were minimized in spite of apartheid until the 1960s, while gender issues were transmuted into family or community issues. Thus, class interests that united race and gender could come to the forefront. There never were purely “practical” gender interests in this case, but rather, as Berger describes, “strategic” gender, race, and class interests combined.

TOWARD A DECOLONIZATION OF WOMEN

Thus far, our analysis has been focused on the search for alternative approaches to understanding women’s experiences and activism in developing nations. We have argued that successful theory must separate us from prevalent androcentric and Eurocentric paradigms and the hierarchical conceptualizations that have been so dominant in the traditional disciplines.
We find most useful those new theories that analyze the commonalities between the subordination of women and the subjugation of people within the capital accumulation process. We are now led to ask: How can women be decolonized?

The concept of decolonization was developed by Fanon ([1961] 1968, 35), who argued that to achieve the liberation of colonized peoples, the whole social structure needed to be changed from the bottom up, creating a new “species of men” in substitution for the old. He saw the historical process of decolonization as trying to “change the order of the world” and as “a program of complete disorder” (p. 36). Recognizing the antagonistic nature of the process, Fanon viewed ideological and socioeconomic decolonization as essential for transforming the historical relationship between the settler and the native, thus creating new human beings.

In attempting to denounce the oppressive psychological effects of colonialism and to lay the groundwork for the national liberation struggles of the African colonies, Fanon did not distinguish between the ways in which colonialism might have affected the formation of men’s and women’s identities. Nonetheless, his work and that of Memmi ([1957] 1965) provide a foundation for understanding the cumulative cultural effects of oppression on the colonized.

Etienne and Leacock (1980), however, were interested in analyzing the impact of colonization on women. They asserted that since the colonial system’s ultimate goal was the economic exploitation of both women and men (p. 17), it had a profound effect on personal relations between them. In many instances, the imposition of European patriarchal social structures destroyed the more egalitarian indigenous societies (Leacock 1980; Nash 1980). Since colonization systematically eroded the autonomy of women, the effects, while detrimental to both men and women, were more oppressive to women. The understanding of women’s subordination in colonial contexts requires recognition of these various layers of oppression, both as women and as the cheapest producers of labor worldwide. Thus, colonial women’s liberation must be balanced with collective national liberation struggles. The metaphor that in colonial and neocolonial societies women are “the slaves of slaves” (Latin American and Caribbean Women’s Collective 1980) dramatizes how industrial nations and colonial states that are usually antagonists, have been historic allies, with a shared interest in perpetuating patriarchy, wherein women have been subordinated and often used as pawns or commodities (Nasimiyu 1990).

Most movements for self-determination among colonial nations have been far from advocating the liberation of women (Acosta-Belén 1986). On
the contrary, women's resistance to male oppression is generally relegated to the margins, separated from class and national struggles, and subordinated to the wider and "higher" cause of national liberation. The issue is often treated as a divisive and distracting self-indulgence, rather than the result of social structures and relations. Thus, it is assumed that women can liberate themselves only after liberating all other oppressed sectors of society. Even in the best of circumstances, when it is acknowledged as important by the state, as in the revolutionary experiences of Cuba and Nicaragua, token reforms become substitutes for much-needed transformations. Reconstruction in both men's and women's roles always manages to remain part of an unrealized future agenda.

The efforts made by the socialist revolutions in Cuba and Nicaragua in creating different conditions for women should not be underrated. In both of these nations, women have benefited, for instance, from both general agrarian reforms and specific policies developing cooperatives and increasing women's participation in agriculture, as well as from direct state intervention on their behalf and more favorable working conditions (Deere and León 1987). Even in these contexts, however, women still face the power of traditional forces in their quest for achieving egalitarian relations in both the productive and the household arenas.

If we accept the premise that the layer of subordination experienced by any woman because of her gender is in many ways comparable to that of any colonial subject (male or female), then for Third World women who share the commonality of the colonial experience, gender represents a compounding factor of their oppression, just as race or ethnicity does for racial ethnic women living in First World countries. The concept of women as a last colony thus becomes a compelling metaphor of liberation and should be an integral part of any liberation struggle. Ultimately, therefore, we see a pressing need to focus on a worldwide process of gender decolonization that calls for profound reformulations and restructuring of the power relations between women and men at the domestic and societal levels, free of all hierarchies.

The extent to which this process can be advanced within a dominant patriarchal capitalist system of production should frame any future struggles and analyses of women's condition. We live in a world where the unfolding expansion of communication technology and mass culture will continue to force Western styles and concepts, with all their individualistic, competitive, hierarchical, and consumerist dimensions, upon the rest of the world. While the triumph of capitalism is celebrated because of the rapid changes taking place in Eastern Europe, workers in developed and developing countries continue to struggle for survival on a daily basis within a global system of
accumulation currently characterized by erratic growth, intensification of conflict and competition, declining wages, greater numbers of vulnerable and marginal workers, and a general polarization of labor.

Although feminists share a universal struggle against gender subordination and for egalitarian relations, the experiences of Third World women, with their compounding layers of oppression, will continue to generate a wide diversity of feminist and women’s movements. They represent articulated responses from women of all classes, races, ethnicities, and nationalities, who, in the midst of their economic and social dilemmas, are carrying the struggle for liberation and equality forward on a variety of fronts—ranging from the home and within the family, to their communities and governments, to their international quests for peace, human rights, and a healthy environment, but most of all, for the possibility of a more just society.

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