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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

Global Householding amid Global Crises

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Households are an enduring feature of human history. They are the building blocks of social formations in every era and at all scales: from small communities to the global economy. Like families, they "order" social relations in particular ways. But households differ from families by allowing for nonkinship members and by not presuming shared group residence. The emphasis lies, rather, in the pooling of diverse (material and nonmaterial) resources with the purpose of ensuring the continuity of the collective unit.[1] Michael Douglass (2006, 423) deploys the term *householding* to underscore how "creating and sustaining a household is a continuous process of social reproduction that covers all life-cycle stages and extends beyond the family." *Global* householding references the many ways in which these processes increasingly occur across national boundaries, for example, through transborder marriages, overseas education, labor migration, and war displacements. The psychological, sociocultural, economic, and political implications of these processes are extraordinarily complex and arguably involve as much as one-quarter of the world's population.[2]

Scholars have hardly begun to map this vast — and pervasively gendered — terrain, which renders it a fitting topic for "Critical Perspectives." My essay introduces the topic by clarifying terms and situating households and householding in today's global political economy. A key issue is the structural articulation of households, states, and markets and how decades of neoliberal policies have altered these units and their relationships, with many gendered effects. Among the prominent changes is a "feminization of employment," characterized in this essay as

1. My account combines points in Smith and Wallerstein 1992; Dunaway 2001; Douglass 2006.

2. "If a reasonable assumption is made that for every migrant there are 3–8 other nonmigrant household members, then the current [2005 estimate of 200 million] numbers of international migrants would suggest that as many as 1.5 billion people — nearly one-quarter of the world's population — are directly engaged in global householding" (Douglass 2006, 424).

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"women's work going global." While this shift appears to advance women's interests, I offer a critical perspective regarding how feminists might interpret this development: What does it mean for gendered households? What are its implications for feminist theory/practice?

States, Markets, and Households

Disciplinary boundaries perpetuate a bifurcation between the "politics" of states and the "economics" of markets, but few contend that these are separate spheres in practice. On one hand, governments have an obvious interest in promoting production and accumulation processes in support of the state's multiple short- and long-term objectives. Governments negotiate — more and less cooperatively — with the representatives of business interests to pursue these objectives and enhance the national economy. On the other hand, capitalist markets cannot function effectively without the infrastructural support and services that governments provide. Functioning markets also require a supply of labor conventionally generated within the "domestic sphere" of households. In these senses, both states and markets have a stake in the success of social reproduction within households: for states, to ensure group reproduction and political allegiance in support of national continuity; for markets, to ensure appropriately socialized labor power in support of accumulation strategies.

Social reproduction carries a range of meanings, from the "merely" biological reproduction that shapes demographic trends to the innumerable practices that enable the reproduction of large social systems. Practices of biological reproduction are shaped — and sometimes transformed — by cultural norms, economic conditions, demographic dynamics, reproductive health and technologies, and disciplinary regimes in regard to sex/affective relations. Conventional accounts assume hetero-patriarchal households as the norm, though this oversimplifies historical patterns and is increasingly belied by actual arrangements. Most often, social reproduction refers to the array of activities that are sited primarily in (physical) households and are necessary for ensuring daily and generational continuity of families and communities. These activities include meeting basic human needs (for food, clothing, shelter, health care); physical and emotional caregiving (for dependents and intimate partners); and socializing children into culturally appropriate identities, behaviors, and belief systems (involving

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gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, nationality, class, education, religion, and political ideology).

Social reproduction thus "produces" societal members who are able to function "appropriately": as family and community members, workers, and citizens. To ensure social reproduction, households pool resources through various combinations of subsistence, unpaid domestic labor, cash income, informal activities, petty trading, transfer payments, and welfare provisioning (of child care, education, health care, etc.) by community and/or publicly funded programs. These processes shape and are shaped by divisions of labor and authority (within and outside of households); differential valorization of (gendered) "skill" and "work" assignments; household strategies concerning production, consumption, and accumulation; patterns of labor mobility within and between nations; and structural articulation of households with markets and states. Some patterns are long-standing and appear to be "stable," yet history and today's medical practices suggest that processes of social — as well as biological — reproduction are subject to small and large changes as an effect of sociocultural, economic, political, and technological developments.

While actual conditions of social reproduction vary, most of the *work* involved is unpaid, assigned to women, and situated "invisibly" within households. Feminists argue that this "hidden" work *matters* economically, politically, and analytically. *Economically*, it not only ensures household survival but also produces intangible social assets and significantly shapes the quality and quantity of labor, goods, and services available beyond the household (through production, consumption, savings, and intergenerational transmission of assets). Households matter *politically* because they are the primary site of biological reproduction and cultural socialization (shaping demographics, producing able citizens, reproducing ideological codes); and stability in basic sociocultural units underpins the stability of nation-states. When global householding occurs, it raises fraught political issues regarding immigration policies, cultural assimilation, and citizenship claims.

Households matter *analytically* in terms of categories and codes that they institutionalize. On one hand, these codes are often contradicted in practice. For example, binary constructions of work — as reproductive *or* productive, unpaid *or* paid, done for love *or* money — misrepresent the variable mix of caring and commodification that typifies "work" both inside and outside of households. And households are not always private, safe, or sites where love (not power or profit seeking) prevails. On the

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other hand, primary socialization in households has *systemic* effects. Important here is the feminist insight that gender is not simply about women and men but operates more pervasively, as a hierarchical codification of "difference" that (over)valorizes that which is associated with masculinity and devalorizes that which is associated with femininity. Long histories of social reproduction in hetero-patriarchal households have normalized this gender coding — manifested in embodied identities and divisions of labor — with the corollary effect of coding "women's work" as "merely reproductive" (natural, unlearned, unskilled, voluntary) and thus not worth counting (being valued) economically. Insofar as the coding is pervasive, its devalorization of feminized labor extends beyond households to all "feminized" work, generating lower status and pay for such work (e.g., caregiving, services, maintenance), whether it is done by women or men (e.g., the poor, minorities, migrants). In this sense, gender coding — which most of us first encounter, observe, and internalize within households — *systemically* shapes who and what counts economically. In an additional sense, the gender politics of social reproduction operate beyond households to perpetuate not only economic but also other inequalities that are materially constituted and culturally normalized by *devaluing that which is feminized* (not all women or only women).[3]

Global Developments and Householding Effects

In recent decades, neoliberal policies have reduced most states' capacity for and/or commitment to public welfare provisioning, even as they fueled flexibilization of production processes (outsourcing, subcontracting, informalization), eroded the power of labor, and exacerbated un- and underemployment (especially of men). The promotion of *flexible* production and employment arrangements generated a new interest in women, who were structurally located — and culturally coded — as cheap, reliable, and flexible workers. In important respects, flexibilization constitutes a systemic *feminization of employment*, understood as simultaneously an embodied transformation of labor markets (more women in the workforce), a conceptual characterization of devalorized labor conditions (more precarious and poorly paid jobs), and a reconfiguration of worker identities (more feminized management styles

3. I offer a "long history" of gendered households and globalization crises in Peterson 2010a, and link global informalization, inequalities, and insecurities in Peterson 2010b.

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and more female breadwinners, with the effect of "emasculating" male workers).[4] For brevity, I characterize this combination of developments and its complex gender changes as "women's work going global."

Critics observe that neoliberal restructuring constitutes a deterioration in economic conditions and alteration of options for most households worldwide, as the reduction of men's earning capacity, decline in the "real value" of wages, and feminization of employment interact. At the same time, neoliberal policies that promote deregulation, flexibilization, and lower tax rates worsen the decline in resources devoted to welfare provisioning — just when the "need" for public support is growing. These entwined developments reveal tensions among state capacities and policies, patterns of capital accumulation, and the viability of households as basic socioeconomic units. Yet gender *codes* continue to assume that men are the primary breadwinners and women the home-bound caregivers; and whatever the economic conditions, women are held disproportionately responsible for social reproduction and family well-being. Hence, when households face reduced earnings and/or diminished public support, pressure increases primarily on women to ensure household survival or sustain household income levels. Feminists refer to a *crisis of social reproduction* as women struggle to "fill the gap" between an amplification of needs (emotional, physical, economic) and a reduction of monetized income, social services, and/or welfare transfers.[5] The current downturn compounds these dynamics and suggests the urgency of generating more systemic analyses of state-market-household linkages.

Global Care and Feminist Concerns

I turn then to consider several senses in which "women's work" has "gone global" and explore what this might mean for feminist analyses of "difference" and shifting inequalities. First, and probably most familiar, is the positive sense in which women's labor force participation has dramatically increased worldwide. Formal employment is variously claimed to enhance the autonomy, self-esteem, and social status of women; to improve their bargaining power and influence over resource

4. The "feminization" of economic restructuring has been widely noted and researched, e.g., Standing 1999; Peterson 2003; Berik, Rodgers, and Seguino 2009.

5. See especially Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Bakker and Gill 2003; Hoskyns and Rai 2007; Bakker and Silvey 2008; Beneria 2008.

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distribution within households; to afford opportunities for skill development, social networking, and access to training and new technologies; and, in some contexts, to advance women's interests in the public arena. The spatial unevenness of economic opportunities generates internal and external migrations that are also associated with positive benefits for women: enabling "escape" from cultural codes and interpersonal relationships deemed oppressive; increasing women's autonomy regarding where and how to live; enhancing women's status (as "breadwinners") and their control over economic decision making (in families and communities of origin); redefining gender roles in divisions of labor; and expanding the domain of acceptable life options for women. These points suggest a celebratory interpretation of women's work going global: Feminists have worked long and hard to expand economic opportunities for women, and succeeded — in spite of great resistance from family members as well as business and government agents who preferred that "women's work" remained within the household, where it is essential (and subsidizes male wages) but unpaid and relatively invisible. In short, the feminization of global employment appears to foster women's empowerment and enable progress toward a feminist goal of gender equality.

A less celebratory interpretation of women's work going global must also be considered. The assumption that paid work is empowering depends ultimately on the nature of employment and the sociocultural, economic, and political context within which it occurs. Formal, secure, and well-paid work offers the greatest promise of empowerment, and yet structural trends of global capitalism indicate that for most women — and increasingly for most men — such work is less, not more, likely. Under conditions of global instability, currently exacerbated by the financial crisis, informal, insecure, and precarious income-earning arrangements represent the future for most workers worldwide. And for feminized workers (read: women, migrants, the poor), the work available may be literally life sustaining, but it is not likely to feel "empowering" (Barker and Feiner 2004).

Expecting women to "gain" from formal employment — or access to microcredit programs — relies on additional assumptions. Women may generate income, but this does not ensure that they have effective control of it or over decisions regarding current consumption and future investments. Gendered divisions of authority and power within households and communities may prevent this, and improvements in women's earning power may fuel competition or conflict as

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conventional roles and statuses are disrupted and resentments ensue. In short, as women pursue economic opportunities, which may enhance their autonomy, they often encounter resistance — from families and communities alike. Feminist interpretations of "empowerment through employment" must acknowledge and address these subjective and social, as well as the objective and material, obstacles to achieving gender equality.

In another sense, the globalization of women's work may economically improve the lives of some women — especially those who earn income for highly valued qualities and skills — but for most women has simply meant *more work*. The reasons are both economic and ideological. Neoliberal restructuring feminized employment but eroded the earning power (and reduced the monetized household resources) of all but elite workers worldwide. As long as conventional codes are in place, when economic conditions deteriorate women are still expected to "fill the gap" by whatever means necessary to ensure family survival and/or sustain household income levels. Saskia Sassen calls this the "feminization of survival" (2000). And as long as conventional codes are in place, when public support is absent or declines, men are still "permitted" (due to normalized gender roles and identities) to avoid reproductive labor that would help sustain households.[6] The effect is often a triple shift — of domestic, informal, and formal labor — for women. We might call this the (feminized) "*privatization* of survival": When women (in and outside of "private" households) do more than their share of ensuring reproduction, production, and family welfare, it relieves men from doing their (personal) share and states from doing their (public) share of sustaining social welfare. It is these entwined "realities" that translate into most women working harder — in and outside of households, sometimes for money, mostly not — worldwide. These points further complicate a feminist assessment of women's work going global, insofar as the work*load* of women in general increases and employment translates more often into a triple shift than into gender equality. A quandary for feminists indeed!

Prospects for women and problems for feminists are illuminated when we turn to the emerging transnational care economy and the global householding it entails. Women now constitute approximately one-half of those migrating internationally, increasingly as the primary (household) income earner, and most of them are migrating for (gender-

6. In spite of increased need, there is little evidence that men are doing a larger share of reproductive labor (Parreñas 2008; DAW 2009).

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coded) domestic and caregiving jobs. The global care economy exemplifies "women's work going global" as women leave deteriorating economic (and other) conditions in the global South to seek more lucrative work in the global North where a "care deficit" exists. The latter is an effect of increasing needs for (privatized) domestic labor, caregiving, and health services (as more women enter the paid labor force and aging populations entail more medical attention and long-term care), at the same time as states reduce public spending in support of social services (health care, child care, elder care) and provide limited resources to enable a "balance" between family life and increased work obligations.

The global care economy raises a host of troubling issues, especially for critics of inequality and feminists pursuing intersectional analyses.[7] In addition to familial and other dislocations associated with the migration of domestic workers, the care drain of medical workers compounds the brain drain that already inhibits Southern development. Receiving countries improve health-care delivery and at minimal expense: They are not paying the costs of training (which are borne by sending states), and insofar as migrant workers have less bargaining power than citizens, they will accept lower wages. While individuals and families in receiving countries are able to access much-needed and valued care of the ill and elderly, this represents a loss of access and care for "others." Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild (2002) argue that migration of women from poorer countries to do women's work in richer countries constitutes a new "emotional imperialism," where love replaces gold as the precious commodity being traded, but as in the past, not on equal terms. Not only is health-care provision depleted where it is comparatively most needed, but there are additional costs as women who provide care far away from their own homes may suffer from isolation, cultural pressures, or parenting guilt; and the effects on children can be debilitating in the North as well as the South.

Pondering Conclusions

We can read the global care economy as an effect of women's centrality in several global trends: the feminization of employment, informality, migration, care work, and remittances. Awareness of *women's centrality in global trends* must surely be celebrated as a feminist achievement.

7. See Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Parreñas 2001, 2008; Kingma 2006; Zimmerman, Litt, and Bose 2006; Bakker and Silvey 2008; Beneria 2008; Peterson and Runyan 2010.

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And increasing women's access to income-earning opportunities and realization of the benefits therefrom are of crucial importance. We know, however, that under neoliberal conditions, women's economic participation has benefited some women but not the majority of the world's women (or most men), and inequalities marked by ethnicity/race, class, gender, and national location have actually worsened (DAW 2009; Peterson and Runyan 2010). What are feminists to make of these paradoxical developments?

We might first note that the re-positioning of women with respect to economic activities does not constitute a reconfiguration of gender coding. What Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2008) characterizes as the "force of domesticity" operates to "stall" transformations of identity and ideology. Thus, while material re-positionings *matter* in multiple ways, conventional categories and gender coding are not easily dislodged; they "live on" in often invisible ways to reproduce devalorized work and workers – and structural inequalities – even as the sex/ethnicity/race/nationality of income earners may change. This confirms the importance of addressing symbolic, subjective, cultural, and ideological dimensions in feminist analyses of "economic" processes.

A second and related observation is that women's work has gone global under exploitative conditions of global capitalism, primarily in the form of devalorized labor and in ways that favor a small elite of the rich and powerful while deepening the structural vulnerability of all workers and thus exacerbating old and generating new inequalities. Issues here include assuming that women and men constitute homogeneous categories and narrowly interpreting gender equality — as simply raising women's status relative to men's — which disregards and tends to reproduce inequalities among women and among men. Viewing women as uniquely responsible and reliable is also problematic: It may promote their agency but may also be used to construct them as "problem solvers," thus compounding their workload. This suggests the importance of reflecting critically on the politics of capitalism (e.g., accepting exploitative relations and structural inequalities) *and* the politics of categories (e.g., assuming homogeneity within identity groups, reproducing stereotypes).

A third observation returns us to households. These remain the primary site of socialization — where we learn the most about gender (and other) identities, social hierarchies and our positions within them, as well as religious and cultural ideologies and how to reproduce, reconfigure, and resist them. But (hetero-patriarchal) households are undergoing

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transformation: Women are estimated to head one-quarter of households in some countries, and movements for same-sex marriage are gaining momentum, while labor migrations, overseas education, transborder marriages, and war displacements are increasing the number of "transnational" households with new gender and citizenship complexities. In sum, these points reveal how households, markets, and states are linked and operate within a global frame; they also expose the centrality of "the private" — sexual relations, gender identities, family/household activities — to contemporary changes and *crises* at the global level. I conclude that households are important sites of power — shaping and shaped by the power of states and the global economy — and warrant much closer and more critical attention.

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Gender, Development and Global Householding

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That issues related to migration and global householding are finally being taken seriously by mainstream development institutions is clear from the focus of the United Nation's 2009 *Human Development Report*. Subtitled *Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development*, it is the first major intergovernmental organization publication to view transnational mobility as integral to human development. The report makes a strong case for recognizing that the impact of migration in relation to development aims is significant for both sending and receiving countries. As the report states repeatedly, the old nation-centered growth and antipoverty frameworks and policies no longer fit when migrants work in one country yet send remittances that reduce poverty and promote human development in another country. Similarly, global householding — the reconfiguration of household and family arrangements as people move across national boundaries — necessitates new frameworks for understanding human livelihood strategies at the micro level. In addition to making the case for taking transnational mobility seriously in development policy, the report offers a set of recommendations that are centered on migration management, regularization, and liberalization policies, such as bilateral temporary workers' agreements that allow nations to enhance growth and competitiveness while simultaneously securing their borders.

Overcoming Barriers acknowledges that contemporary discussions of migration and global householding often take place against a backdrop of significant popular skepticism, and its reported research findings and policy conclusions appear to be specifically aimed at containing this

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