

WOMEN, REPRODUCTION AND GLOBALIZATION

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INTRODUCTION

This essay continues a research that I started in the 1980s on the impact of globalization on women and the international feminist struggle. The framework for it came from the lesson I learnt from the wages for housework movement of the 1970s which stressed that the unpaid work by which labor is reproduced is the root of the exploitation of women in the capitalist society; for this labor is the main social function expected from us, and the pillar upon which every other form of work and the accumulation of wealth depend.

This framework – which has shaped my view of globalization – has led me to formulate a number of theses that I first developed in *Reproduction and Feminist Struggle in the New International Division of Labor* (Federici 1995; 1999)². These are as follows:

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- (a) We cannot understand the consequences of globalization on women and gender relations as long as we look at globalization only from the global restructuring of commodity production perspective and ignore, instead, the global restructuring of work that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s and by which human beings and labor-force are reproduced.
- (b) The most significant developments in this context have been the crisis of the reproductive systems of the Third World, and the emergence of a New International Division of Labor (NIDL) whereby migrant women now do most of the work needed for the reproduction of the work-force in industrialized countries, especially in Europe and the U.S.
- (c) Both developments have opened a crisis for the international feminist movement, as they are the manifestation of a deep deterioration in the social and economic status of women and of the determination of new power relations between first and third world women, replicating, in many ways, the power relations between women and men.

Reproduction and Feminist Struggle was written on the eve of the Beijing Conference of 1995. Seven years later, the conclusions which I presented there are well confirmed. In particular, it has become clear that the impoverishment that women have experienced in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Pacific, and the former socialist countries is not a transitory phenomenon, nor a consequence of poorly implemented policy recommendations, as is often claimed by the World Bank, but a direct consequence of these regions' further "integration" into the global economy.

It is also confirmed that the initiatives undertaken by the United Nations to promote women's rights have been ineffectual; for despite four global conferences on women and a decade devoted to the promotion of women's rights, women's social and economic condition continues to deteriorate. Moreover, except for the cre-

ation of a number of “Bureaus for Women’s Affairs” (WEDO 1998) and a growing governmental concern with violence against women, the recommendations of the Platform for Action adopted at Beijing have not been followed in most countries³. Maybe it cannot be otherwise, since these recommendations are in conflict with the programs imposed on most Third World countries by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – the main agencies driving the present phase of globalization⁴. In what follows, I substantiate these claims by examining the effects on women of the New International Division of Labor that has developed in the 1980s and 1990s, and by describing what some have called the “globalization of care”. First however, I briefly discuss what I mean by “globalization.”

GLOBALIZATION AS GLOBAL PROLETARIANIZATION AND DISINVESTMENT IN THE REPRODUCTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL WORK FORCE

“Globalization” has been described in different ways. In the literature emanating from the international financial institutions, it is portrayed as a more effective system of economic management, ensuring the free circulation of goods and enhancing the “comparative advantage” of different countries, each presumably utilizing its resources to the best effect for both local populations and world

³ The UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) reported five years after the Beijing conference that only eight out of the UN’s 188 members states have met the minimal indicators – greater gender equality in paid employment and education and women holding at least 30% of parliament seats. Indeed, there were some areas of the world like Eastern Europe that suffered a dramatic “gender equity” setback in the 1990s. For an analysis of the aftermath of the Beijing conference see also the series of reports published by African Agenda (Ocran 1999: 18-27 and Ocran 2000 : 33-35).

⁴ I write “the present phase” to remind the reader that capitalism was born as a world economy, and that 19th and 20th century colonialism were steps in a process of economic globalization. (Wallerstein 1974; Mies 1986; Potts 1990; Midnight Notes 1992).

development. Policy-analysts thus stress the globalization of financial markets, capital investments, new technologies which, we are told, will lead in the foreseeable future to increased prosperity also in the “developing” countries.

Others, with an eye to the expectations generated in an earlier phase of this process, identify globalization with the migration of labor-intensive industries to the Third World, once hailed as a factor of emancipation for women who represent the bulk of the work-force in the new industrial outfits.

My own perspective is that “globalization” is a strategy seeking to determine a process of global proletarianization and the formation of a global labor market as means to cheapen the cost of labor, reduce workers’ entitlements, and intensify exploitation. These, in fact, are the most unmistakable effects of the policies by which globalization is driven.

But however defined, the social and economic consequences of globalization cannot be denied. After two decades of globalizing interventions in the world economy (creation of the World Trade organization (WTO), structural adjustment, TRIPS, etc.) one billion people live in conditions of “absolute poverty” (UN Population Fund 2001)⁵. Meanwhile, the Third World debt has increased from \$800 billion in 1980 to a staggering \$2,900 billion in 1999 (World Bank 2000), precluding the possibility of repayment, while the predicted industrialization of the Third World has not materialized

⁵ “Based upon an international poverty line of \$1 per day *per capita*, at 1993 prices, in 1998 there were 800 million people living in this condition just in Asia and the Pacific, amounting to 67% of the world’s poor” (UNESCAP 2001). Asia and the Pacific also have the largest number of undernourished people, which has continued to grow, however, in three out of the five continents, especially between 1990-1992 and 1994-1996. <www.fao.org/NEWS/FACTFILE/FF9602-E.HTM>.

Symptomatic of the collapse of the reproductive systems in the Third World is the increase in the number of suicides among older women even in a country like in Argentina, where sociologists would have least expected it. (“The Days Dwindle Down to Poverty and Suicide.” *New York Times*, 11/17/92).

despite the proliferation of Free Processing Zones (FPZs). In fact, industry-wise, much of the Third World has been further underdeveloped, due to the closures of state-subsidized industries and to import liberalization that has flooded domestic markets with cheap goods. How illusory the industrialization of the “South” has turned out to be is illustrated by the shrinking of industrial production in the aftermath of the Asian crisis of 1997-1999, in the very countries driving industrial expansion, including the four “Asian tigers” once upheld as a model for the rest of the Third World.

Most important, mechanisms are now in place – debt servicing, structural adjustment, import liberalization and, crucial to all, generalized warfare⁶ – that systematically lead millions of people away from their means of subsistence, uprooting them from their lands, their jobs, their countries, in what appears as the largest proletarianization and migration process since the turn of the 20th century (Federici 1992; 1999).

These, as I have already argued, are not unintended results. Rather, they are the consequences of a strategy that seeks not only to underdevelop the reproductive systems of the Third World, and thereby create a population of immigrant/refugee workers forced to accept work at any conditions, but also to undermine workers’ entitlements in every country. Witness the fact that, at the dawn of the

⁶ As I have shown in *War, Globalization, and Reproduction* there is a close connection between the sudden proliferation of “ethnic” and “religious” wars over the last two decades and their expansion into global conflicts and economic and social globalization. Structural adjustment in itself is a form of warfare as it strips millions from their means of livelihood, and further instigates warfare as it blocks the traditional avenues to income and wealth, thus incentivizing plunder as means of accumulation. By causing mass unemployment and the disintegration of families and communities structural adjustment also makes young people and children available for recruitment into local armies (Federici 2000, 2001). Add Anthony H. Richmond’s argument that “*The transnational corporations that make up the global economic system... are united in their dependence on energy... and will stop at nothing to ensure a continued supply of cheap oil and cheap labor. [Thus] [t]he result of internal conflicts and external wars will be a massive increase in the number of refugees seeking asylum. [For] Social conflict has been globalized...*” (Richmond 1994: 205).

third millenium, coercion and slave-like forms of labor have reappeared also in the citadels of industrialization (Bales 1999), and the fact that, here too, once sacred, hard-won workers' rights (pensions, healthcare, job security) are questioned. Witness, above all, the insistence with which the World Bank and the IMF have continued, year after year, to impose their "structural adjustments programs" and neo-liberal agendas as the only possible alternative, despite the devastating effects they have had for the populations subjected to them, who literally look at them as a death sentence.

WOMEN, REPRODUCTION, AND THE NEW INTERNATIONAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

What precedes is my perspective on the impact of globalization on women. The first thing to be noted here is that we can no longer assume, as feminist economists once did, that globalization can "empower" women, through increased industrial employment providing them with a ticket to "modernization" and economic independence. Not only has mounting evidence documenting the coercive nature of work in the *maquilas* and the low wages attached to it dissipated much of the original optimism (NLC 1998; Madeley 1999)⁷. Such developments as the debt crisis, the policies of structural adjustment, and eventually the increase in female migration have been even more important than the advent of the "global assembly line", both statistically and socially.

The evidence for my claim is first of quantitative nature.

⁷ As Shahra Razavi, among others, has noted in her excellent presentation to this conference ("Globalisation, Employment and Women's Rights: a Southern Perspective"), women have not gained a more egalitarian relation with men from employment in the "global assembly line," as they have been excluded from all the social benefits to which workers were entitled in the past, in addition to very low wages. In other words, unlike what feminists economist anticipated women did not gain from the loss of male workers' power, nor were they able to get their autonomy through employment and earnings.

After an apparent boom, in the early 1980s, female employment in Free Export Zones (FEZ) and other industrial outfits, as well as industrial activity as a whole, has been shrinking in the 1990s or stagnating in much of the Third World, even in the most promising cases, Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP 2001) where, after the 1997-1999 crisis, industrial unemployment has risen, leading to the deportation of many workers, wages have fallen⁸, and the prospects for the future remain bleak in the face of a world commodity glut (UN 2001a)⁹.

This assessment is confirmed by Shahra Razavi who points out that while trade liberalization has expanded employment in the export sector of a select number of Third World countries, it has also led to loss of jobs in their local industries, compounding the collapse of the public sector, (following the implementation of structural

⁸ According to the ILO Report, *Towards Full Employment Prospects and Problems in Asia and the Pacific*, by the end of 1998, unemployment in the region was 7% compared to 3% in 1997; in Thailand it was 5%; in Indonesia 8 million jobs were lost. Real wages were also falling, by as much as 30% in Indonesia; 8% in Thailand; and 5% to 10% in South Korea. Quoted in Boonthan Sakanand, "Labouring Under the Crisis" InterPress Service (1/30/1999). Another consequence of the downturn following the Asian financial crisis was the deportation of many workers from other parts of Asia to which women were particularly vulnerable as they were concentrated in the most precarious forms of waged employment and thus most exposed to lay-offs and less easily reached by labor organizations (ILO 1998a).

However, as the case of Thailand suggests, female citizen-workers were also in trouble. The Labour and Social Welfare Ministry's record of job termination, which was collected from complaints lodged by workers and visits made to work-places from January 1 to November 30, 1998, shows that 1,000 work-places, that covered 22 kinds of businesses, terminated employment of 47,634 workers from a total of 212,536 employed. Among the retrenched workers, 57.29% or 27,294 were women, from a total of 123,241 women employed (Prakankasemsuk 1999).

⁹ UN economists (UN 2001a: 97-107) reviewed the situation of the East Asian economies pessimistically. They write: "*The slowdown in East Asia is expected to continue until the latter half of 2001... household income has been growing slowly, as the unemployment rate, though improved in many countries in 2000, has not returned to its pre-crisis level and the jobless rate rose again in early 2001... the manufacturing sector slowed sharply throughout the region in the fourth quarter of 2000, primarily in response to slowing exports.*"

adjustment) where women are usually employed. In addition, manufacturing work is presently “de-feminizing”, as men are taking over the jobs in the *maquilas* because of growing unemployment.

Noting that most international trade transactions still occur between countries of the OECD, Razavi concludes that the “global economy” is somewhat a myth, at least as far as women are concerned (Razavi 2002). But I would argue otherwise since the extent of globalization should not be measured on the basis of the global expansion of industrial investment, but rather on the capacity of policies such as SAP to determine a global pool of labor to be used in many different capacities and countries. In other words, what is crucial for globalization is the formation of a world proletariat (mostly women), increasingly formed of migrant/refugee labor to be employed in the industries of the North or, in the case of women, in the increasingly globalized reproductive sector.

We can see the significance of this aspect of globalization for women from the fact that whereas female industrial employment and wages have stagnated or fallen in the 1990s, the number of women migrating to other Third World regions or from the Third to the First World has continued to increase. (See Table 1 in the Appendix, showing that the number of women migrating from India, Thailand, and the Philippines is larger than the number of workers attracted to the domestic manufacturing sector in the post-Beijing era).

According to the United Nations, between the mid-1970s and 1980s, in a migrant population of 118 millions, women represented 56 millions, that is 48%. But by the mid 1980s, the figure had jumped to 77 millions (Stalker 1994 : 106). By the 1990s, women were migrating in higher number than men¹⁰ and they were also beginning to migrate on their own, rather than as dependents of

¹⁰ In Asia, in the 1970s, only 15% of the migrant workers were women; by the 1990s, however, women were close to 50% of the migrants (Alyanak 1998). UNESCAP does

male migrants. In the United States, where the predominance of female immigrants was first recorded in 1992 (US Department of Justice 1998 : 52), women now constitute a large percentage of the *sans papiers*, and in the case of settled undocumented Mexican immigrants, the largest (Chang 2000 : 5).

As for the countries of immigration, by 1990, 41% of all migrants were in Europe and the U.S., where among the jobs migrant women could expect to perform, the most important one, numerically, was and is domestic labor, followed by entertainment, tourism, and health-care. Presumably, according to the ILO, as many as 350,000 undocumented female migrants work in the U.S. as domestics, but their numbers are undoubtedly higher, since domestics are statistically invisible whether they are documented or not (NCRW 1995).

Socially, this mass migration of women demonstrates the extent of the collapse of reproduction in the Third World and the former socialist countries, as well as the emergence of a new international division of labor (NIDL) whereby large parts of the work reproducing the work-force in industrialized countries is now performed by immigrant women. Then the people who clean people's homes and offices, take care of the children and the elderly, service the sexual needs of workers in Europe and North America are more and more often immigrant women, mostly coming from Asia, Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean islands, through a transfer of labor that some have labeled the "globalization of care."

I will return to this point later. What I want to stress here is that this phenomenon too cannot be seen as a consequence of a spontaneous evolution of economic dynamics. Different factors have cer-

not give a precise number concerning the percentage of women in the present migratory flow, but notices that, in 1997, it was approximately 78% for Indonesia and 16% for Thailand.

In 1990, 41% of all migrants were in Europe and North America (UN1997).

tainly contributed to it. Among them is the demographic decline in Western Europe, falling below replacement levels (Chell-Robinson 2000; United Nations 2000)¹¹ in some countries (Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden), but also the increase in extra-domestic female employment in industrialized countries, including the employment of mothers of young children¹² that developed without any significant change in the distribution of domestic work within the family, or without any increase in public investment in child-care and other form of reproductive work. As for the reasons why Third World women seek domestic employment in Europe, the US, Japan, even when over-qualified, the "Declaration of Migrant Domestic Workers in Europe" (2001) states that some do it "*because they cannot make a living for themselves and their families in their home country;... some are fleeing conflict or war...; others need to pay for medicine or education for their families...*"

But as Cynthia Enloe (1990) and Grace Chang (2000) argued in their path-breaking works, the massive migration of women from the Third World, in the 1980s and 1990s should not be seen as an automatic result of push-pull factors. As Grace Chang writes in *Disposable Domesticity*, what we have here is a carefully orchestrated strategy, pursued through the cooperation of international agencies, governments, and even religious institutions using the pauperization and social crisis opened by the politics of Structural Adjustment to force Third World women to migrate to Europe and North America, to take domestic jobs – the only ones available to them – so as to ensure that the reproduction of the work-force in

¹¹ As Chell-Robinson wrote in 2000, "*The Italian fertility rate is well below the 2.1 rate which assures [the] replacement of the population. Italy's 1.27 fertility rates is the lowest in Europe. The percentage of the population in the over-65 group in 1991 was 14.8 per cent and by 2001 will have reached 20.8 per cent.*" Italy is not a unique case. Declining population rates or Zero-population growth are recorded in other European countries such as Austria (-0.1), Greece (00), Germany (00), Spain (00), Sweden (-0.1), Switzerland (-0.1). (United Nations 2000).

¹² 65 per cent of mothers of children aged six or under are now in the waged work-force in the US (p. 140).

the metropolitan areas can occur at practically no cost for employers or at a cost no higher than that of unpaid domestic work (Chang 2000 : 3-4; 13).

Chang examines, in this context, how the dismantling of welfare and the exclusion of immigrant women from any entitlements in the United States has contributed to this situation, preventing them from raising their children once arrived in the country, and thereby reducing the cost of their reproduction to a minimum (*ibid.*: 7-11). Thus, as she points out, migrant domestic workers pay the price of adjustment twice, first in their home countries and then in the countries of migration where their labor but not their reproduction is needed.

A similar point has been made by Cynthia Enloe in *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, where she argues that the debt crisis and structural adjustment have allowed financial organizations like the IMF and the World Bank to respond to the crisis opened by the feminist movement of the 1970s on the family front and which expressed itself through a massive refusal of unpaid domestic labor through its redistribution on the shoulders of Third World women. Like Chang and others (e.g. Anderson 2000), Enloe also demonstrates the complicity of indebted Third World governments in this process, for whom the remittances sent by immigrant women often constitute one of the main sources of their foreign currency earnings (Enloe 1990: 187-188). In *Doing the Dirty Work* (2000), Bridget Anderson adds an account of the involvement of religious organizations, like CARITAS who has become one of the channels through which migrant domestic workers become linked to their future employers (Anderson: 36, 52-53).

From a neo-liberal perspective, then, a perfect fit would seem to have been achieved between the needs of Third World and Eastern European women trying to feed their families and refusing total pauperization, the needs of women in industrialized countries increasingly employed out of their homes even when they have

young children, the needs of financial organizations who see in the export of women a means for indebted countries to pay their external debts, and the needs of the governments which, in Europe and the US, through female migration, can cut the cost of labor, and in the Third World, can fill the state reserves with “hard currency” and free themselves from a potential source of unrest¹³.

But this situation actually demonstrates that women’s “integration into the global economy” is in fact a further transfer of resources from the Third to the First World and a theft of women’s labor, since employers in the countries of arrival benefit from the labor of workers whose social reproduction they never paid for.

Moreover the cost is high for by migrant women who often risk their lives just in the attempt to enter a country, and then must face years of loneliness and anxiety as they are separated from their families and must work in environments hostile to them. The families of the immigrant women pay a high cost as well, and above all their children¹⁴, who are left in the care of paid nannies, who in turn leave their own children in the care of other women (Hochschild 2000, 136). We are reminded here of Arlie Russel Hochschild’s argument that today’s global economy does not only consist of transfers of money and capital but of global transfers of love also, which ultimate beneficiaries are multinational corporations in their efforts to portray themselves as a “one big family” to their employers (*ibid.*: 141).

¹³ Overseas workers are a major source of foreign currency earnings in many countries. In 1997, these remittances amounted to \$10.33 billion in India; \$6.79 billion in the Philippines; \$1.74 billion in Pakistan; \$1.4 billion in Thailand; and \$1.52 billion in Bangladesh. These figures do not include the remittances that are sent through informal channels which, in some cases, can be as high as those sent through the formal ones (UNESCAP 2001 : 140).

¹⁴ See on this topic Feisal Samath’s description of the consequences of women’s migration in Sri Lanka, where she shows that their leaving has spawned a host of social problems: alcoholism, extramarital affairs, incest, juvenile delinquency.

As nowadays immigrant domestic workers are mostly hired by women who are themselves recipients of relatively low wages and vitally interested in keeping the wages of their “helpers” as low as they can; as housework is still not considered a “real work” and as, working apart from each other, domestic workers rarely manage to have their work contracts fully defined and respected; as they are not only required to perform physical labor but also “care” (Hochschild 2000; Anderson 2000 : 114-121) while at the same time, they must live with the threat of seeing the ties which they create with the people they assist broken from one moment to the next; obviously paid domestic work can easily turn into a new form of domestic slavery, the more so as immigration laws make domestics vulnerable to abuse. This not just a metaphor. Coercion, applied in many ways, is a widespread practice in every country, and is bound to grow as more restrictive immigration laws are passed, giving employers more power to blackmail those who work for them¹⁵. Thus, as the “Declaration of the Migrant Domestic Workers in Europe” states on this subject:

“According to statistics from all over Europe the majority of us will suffer psychological abuse in the work place; many will be locked into the house or made to sleep on the floor. Most of us will work very long hours for very little pay. Some of us will not be paid at all, and some of us will suffer from sexual and physical abuse”. (Abramsky 2001 :215)

By stressing these facts I do not wish to picture migrant workers as passive victims of economic necessity, nor ignore the fact that migration is a form of struggle, the expression of a refusal of pauperization and/or patriarchal family relations. Nor do I suggest that domestic labor is less valuable or necessary than other forms of work. Yet, my point is that: (a) the decision to migrate is generally made under very adverse conditions and cannot be used to claim that globalization opens new “career opportunities” to women; (b) indispensable

¹⁵ Exemplary is the law passed in early March 2002 by the Italian government that makes residence for immigrants dependent on a work contract.

as it may be for millions of families and individuals to employ a domestic worker, it cannot be considered as the solution to the problem of the daily production and reproduction of life and labor, and even less as a path to women's solidarity and liberation.

Mary Romero's work (1992) gives a crucial insight into the pitfalls of the "marketization of care". She argues that the growing employment of domestic workers in the U.S. has contributed to buttress the "traditional", patriarchal sexual division of labor within the family which the feminist movement had challenged, but spared women the task of convincing their male partners and children to share the housework (ibid.: 102) and blunted the struggle for the social recognition of reproductive labor as work. Romero's point is proven by statistics, showing that, despite the increase of extra-domestic employment, the performance of household chores still remains the responsibility of the woman who, in the absence of a maid, performs the bulk of domestic work. The same dynamic also prevails at the institutional level where, despite the lip-service paid to the social value of housework, even in "high income" countries of the "North" nothing has been done to break down the social and economic divide between the production of goods and the production of human beings. In fact, in a climate of rampant neo-liberalism, this divide and the higher estimate given to commodity production at the expense of the production of human beings are today stronger than ever. In the US, Aid to Dependent Children, which recognized the work of sole mothers has been gutted (Abramovitz 1996 : 349-365) and so have other forms of public investment in reproduction. Then after two decades of feminist struggle, women still have to choose between family and "work," caring for their children or economic independence, social isolation or a "job like a man," that is a job leaving no time for family and communal relations¹⁶.

¹⁶ It is significant that even women who have a high degree of social power do not escape this dilemma. Thus as a recently released US General Accounting Office study of female and male managers' lives indicates about 60% of female managers do not have families, while 60 % of male managers do (Goldstein 2002).

Another aspect of the global restructuring of domestic labor demonstrates the high cost that all women are paying for it, and the ways in which globalization thwarts the possibility of women's liberation: the new and deeper power relation between the impoverished women in the Third World – a term that now can be extended also to the former socialist countries – and their domestic employers in the homes of the First world. Far from contributing to women's liberation, it is indeed something of a scandal that, in the very decades when international feminism has come of age, the relation through which First and Third World women have most commonly met, at a mass level, has been that of madams and maids.

Unfortunately, North American and European feminists have rarely raised this issue, to the detriment of their cause, I would argue, since ignorance on this subject can only sanction a colonial relation, undermining the bonds presumably fostered by international feminism. It is difficult, in fact, to imagine how an international feminist movement can be built at a mass level, if the power relations and divisions that globalization creates among women are not overcome. Meanwhile, those who are addressing this question are immigrant domestic workers, who, despite the difficult conditions to which their legal status and the lack of resources confine them have been in the forefront of the struggle against the conditions of domestic work as well as the struggle for the expansion of investment in reproduction.

CONCLUSION

The situation which I have described only touches upon a part of the reorganization of reproductive labor produced by the new global economy, and is just one window on the negative consequences of globalization for women. A full picture in fact would include (a) the development of an *international baby-market* which enables women in the First World to have the children they want, either through surrogacy or adoption, without sacrificing their

health or their career; and (b) the globalization of the sex industry, which no less than many other forms of migrant work, in now in good part built on coerced labour, providing workers, at a time of falling wages and rising unemployment, a cheap safety valve for their frustrations.

What we find, in both cases, is that, with migrant domestic work, the underdevelopment of reproduction in the Third World serves to create a situation of “debt bondage” whereby governments are ready to surrender their citizens in exchange for increased revenues (Chang, 2000), and women themselves are willing to take very high risks, including the risk of death and enslavement, not to be trapped in the type of misery the World Bank and IMF and their military backers have in store for them.

Thus, an international feminist agenda must first demand the termination of the neo-liberal policies which are now driving globalization. In particular, it must demand that the Third World debt be cancelled and the World Bank’s adjustment programs be immediately phased out, for these are the main obstacles to women’s access to basic resources such as land, employment, a sound environment, healthcare, and and not have to risk their lives or separate themselves from their children to make ends meet. On a broader level, what needs to be phased out is the global dictatorship of the companies and financial institutions which now shape world politics, with their political and military backups. Otherwise neither high sounding declarations nor the passing of laws banning gender-based discrimination and violence against women will do. For the violence that women confront is not domestic violence alone, but the institutional violence inscribed in economic programs that sustain globalization and the immigration laws that rule workers’ mobility within the global economy, whose effect is to maximize the exploitation of immigrant labour.

Thus, a further priority for international feminism must be the campaign for immigrant rights – beginning with the right to enter

a country – and the rights of refugees seeking asylum. At the same time, it is crucial that feminists re-launch a struggle over housework if this unpaid labor is not to continue to circulate in the social body, to be periodically shifted on the shoulders of other women. Housework is a necessary labor and should not be degraded, as it inevitably is when those performing it are not paid or are paid at the lowest level, in terms of the money received, the hours worked, and the social relations surrounding their work. It is time we realize in fact that once generalized, the strategy pursued by the individual “madam,” trying to reduce the cost of “her” maid’s work to a minimum, turns into a social disaster. It may save the family’s budget, but it institutionalizes the degradation of social reproduction and as such it is cannot be sustained.

What is needed, then, is a social struggle to make housework compatible with the requirements of self-determination. This is where the struggle for immigrant women’s rights meets the struggle for pensions, good housing, universal healthcare, access to land and, in the cities, access to urban gardens, now feeding a billion people across the planet but increasingly under attack. This struggle is especially timely as new trade negotiations, initiated in Doha (Qatar) are attempting to carry globalization to its logical conclusion and globalize all services, including reproductive ones, from cleaning companies to hospitals, old age centers and day-care centers, so that in completion of the neo-liberal dream, reproduction of all humanity should pass through the narrow gate of the market.

Appendix

Migration versus manufacturing employment: 1995-1999
(in thousands)

Country	Average annual migration	Average annual increase in manufacturing employment
India	140	83
Indonesia	180	348
Thailand	40	5
Philippines	120	65

Calculated from UNESCAP (2000) and UNESCAP (2001).

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