
Women of the Working Poor

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Introduction

All the articles in this issue of the *Bulletin* address in a number of different ways, the problem of women's work within the informal sector. In some, the debate surrounding the usefulness of the concept has been examined, while in others it is the form that women's work takes which has been the main concern, as well as the way in which women in fragmented small-scale service enterprises can be organised. This article has two purposes: to discuss briefly some of the issues raised in the articles relating to women's economic participation; and to discuss a number of issues of concern not mentioned so far but which we consider crucial to further research in the field. We are concerned to identify social and political as much as economic factors, as well as the dynamic of the inter-relationship between them, which both structure and determine the form of women's participation, and thus the shape of their lives.

The Relationship Between the Informal Sector and Capital

One important area of theoretical debate relating to the informal sector concerns its function in capital accumulation. Dissatisfaction with the analysis of the economies of developing countries in terms of two separate economic sectors—traditional/modern, subsistence agrarian/capitalist industrial (or whichever dualist terms are used)—led to attempts to specify the inter-connections between the two sectors. This was found to lie in the functional relationship of the informal sector to the capitalist, or formal sector. The structural linkage between the two sectors, permitting a higher rate of capital accumulation, is seen as the reason why in peripheral or dependent Third World economies this sector does not disappear but is expanding. Goods and services provided to wage workers and capitalists by informal sector operators, producing under highly competitive and exploitative conditions, enable workers to accept a lower wage packet, and capitalists to cheapen certain aspects of production [Gerry 1974; Bose 1978]. The typical form of extraction of the surplus—absolute surplus extraction—involves lengthening the working day, worsening conditions of work, and so on, but the demographic response to such conditions (high fertility rates because the larger the family the more helping hands to support the family) ensures the continual growth of the surplus labour pool and of the informal sector.

Recognition of the link between the two sectors, as Bienefeld notes, has meant an important clarification at the conceptual level, but it leaves unresolved the planners' task of finding useful policy solutions. There are also considerable problems, both theoretical and empirical, with the conceptualisation of the informal sector as functional to capitalism. However true it may be that the sector enables individual capitalists to benefit, under certain conditions, its utility to capital in general is questionable. Furthermore, to derive a casual relationship from this is to fall into circular reasoning or teleology. The argument that the existence of the types of economic activity generally described as informal, and in particular of markets for the products, enables capitalists to pay lower wages than they would otherwise have to, is conceptually dubious and empirically unproven [Schmitz 1981]. Indeed, the reverse could equally well be argued: that the existence of this sector gives labour an alternative to direct exploitation by capital, by allowing it to resist very low wage levels, which, according to the laws of supply and demand, should result from a large supply of surplus labour. One of the chief difficulties, in fact, with the formulation lies in the assumptions made about the mechanism determining wage levels in any one economy or sector of the economy. It is generally recognised that these are the result of inter-relationships between a variety of factors: the organic composition of capital; the size and nature of the labour pool; the relative power of the different fractions of labour; the level of competition between different fractions of capital; the level of skill requirements in relation to supply; the social status of the person to be employed (eg gender and ethnic considerations). In this sense, the existence of alternative economic opportunities, outside the formal wage sector, is only one of a number of determinants, and by no means the critical one.

A similar argument has been put forward about the function of women's work within the home to capital. Much of the domestic labour debate has centred on the importance of women's domestic work for the rate of accumulation of surplus, by arguing that housework contributes to the reproduction of labour power. The housewife through her labour produces use values and provides services, which, if bought on the market, would increase the cost of subsistence and thus force wages to rise. In other words, through their ability to stretch the wage and their provision of unremunerated services within the home, housewives enable capital

to pay lower wages than would be needed for the reproduction of the labourer and the future generation of labourers. The housewife's unpaid labour is transferred to the capitalist sector as surplus value: 'the mechanism by which this transfer of surplus labour from housework to the capitalist sector takes place is the payment by the capitalist of wages below the value of labour power' [Harrison 1973].

A number of criticisms have been made of this argument. For one thing, it assumes that the value of labour power always includes the cost of reproducing the working class family. In fact, only in those advanced capitalist countries where the value of labour power has been established, through labour militancy, at a level which covers the cost of non-working wives and children, can the assumption that domestic labour lowers the value of labour power be made [Molyneux 1978:11]. In many peripheral economies the family wage (a single wage sufficient to maintain a working class family at a certain standard of living)¹ is not yet generalised even among fully proletarianised workers.

A parallel argument concerns the function of women's work within the informal sector. According to this, wages for men in the formal sector are set at a certain level in the knowledge that their wives will augment this in a number of ways, particularly by supplementing their husbands' earning by taking up irregular income-generating work. There are, as we have noted, difficulties in verifying this argument, but nonetheless it is important to question whether the predominance of women in highly exploitative casual work is the mechanism which permits men to sell their labour power in industrial wage employment for less than the family wage.

Rather than arguing for some kind of conspiracy theory in which the employer is able to pay wages below family subsistence because he knows that women will take up the slack, it may be more useful to identify the pressures exerted on labour not to accept an individual wage, and the pressures exerted on capital to offer a family wage to certain categories of labour.

The degree to which male workers can demand a level of wages which enables them to secure the privatisation and domestication of their wife and children is, Banerjee argues, dependent upon the extent to which they can mobilise political pressure on their own behalf against capital. One of the critical arguments in such a struggle

centres on the general conditions for the reproduction of the labour force. If working class women are unable to guarantee the production of a future generation of a kind and quality required both by capital and the state, then the state may well intervene ostensibly on behalf of labour. One of the most influential arguments used by those who tried to increase wages and, at the same time, exclude married women from the industrial labour force in England in the 19th century, was the lamentable physical condition of working class children and the extremely high mortality rates registered in the industrial centres. Legislation prohibiting the use of women in certain types of work, restricting the numbers of hours they could work, and ending night work for them, was resisted fiercely by many capitalists on the grounds that it would ruin them. However, poor reproductive performance in itself is not a sufficient condition for state intervention; rather, the relationship between this and other factors, such as the size of the labour surplus, and the extent to which alternative means to recruit labour exist (such as sponsored immigration) determines the state's involvement.²

This discussion indicates that the relationship between the wages that capitalist enterprises may offer to differing categories of workers, and the existence of a widespread sector of economic activity not directly organised by capital, cannot be understood solely in simple economic terms. There are important political and social dimensions to the problem, and differences in resistance to proletarianisation which should not be overlooked. At the same time, the inconsistencies, contradictions and competing forces within the social and economic system have to be highlighted rather than invisibilised by a vision of an all-powerful capital that is able to dictate the optimal conditions for its own survival.

The Conditions Determining the Form of Women's Work

It is important to identify those factors within the structure of the capitalist organisation of production and the relations of production, which enable women's work to be unpaid and invisibilised, or poorly paid and marginalised. Given the constraints of a short article, the following discussion can address only two of the most important issues: the privatisation of women's work, and the constitution of women as subsidiary or secondary workers.

Privatisation

Despite the very different process of capitalist expansion experienced, there has been a tendency to equate the position of urban women in peripheral economies

¹ The family wage is itself a disputed concept because even in advanced capitalist countries the family wage cannot cover procuring all the family's needs through the market. It is embedded in the concept is the notion of the domestic worker who converts the cash wage into use values through the mediation of her own unpaid labour. The hidden meaning of the word *housewife* thus becomes illuminated.

² Spindel makes this point in relation to the policy of sponsored immigration to Brazil in the late 19th century.

with that of women in metropolitan capitalist economies, given that neither tend any longer to be involved in subsistence production. Historically, increasing stratification by gender has accompanied the development of industrial capitalism, and the loss of the family's role as a primary unit of social production, through the separation of its three functions of production, consumption and distribution. As this process occurred in 19th century Europe, production became centralised in the workshop or factory, and while men typically became full-time and life-long proletarians, women were never fully proletarianised. When young they were drawn into very narrow sectors of production (typically textiles, food processing) or into services (the classic employment for unmarried women being domestic service), but once married they were absorbed back into the home to become working class housewives. Women's labour became increasingly privatised and directed to the transformation of the wage into use values for consumption within the home, their main task being to stretch the man's wage so that it would cover the main needs of the family.³ This domestication of women was reinforced by an ideological emphasis on women's reproductive and domestic roles, and later, with the removal of children from the labour force, on their roles as prime socialisers of future hardworking and disciplined workers.

In fact, in the urban centres of the periphery the stereotype of the house-bound housewife holds true for only a limited number of women. Since only a very small percentage of men are in regular wage employment, the majority of working class women have to supplement the family budget by undertaking a variety of badly paid, unskilled income generating activities. Without their active economic participation, their families would not survive.

Furthermore, any clear-cut distinction between the two polar sets of economies is somewhat forced in practice. It is not at all clear that the removal of married women from the labour force was as total in the metropolitan countries as has been assumed: increasingly the evidence shows that women undertook a wide variety of paid work, casual and irregular, to supplement an inadequate 'breadwinner's wage'⁴ [Stedman Jones 1971]. It is therefore important to identify the extent to which the processes of dependent capitalist development undergone in different peripheral economies are structurally dissimilar to those in metropolitan ones, or whether the differences are more ones of magnitude.

³ For an excellent description of the magnitude of this task see Maude Pember Reeves [1979], and also Margaret Llewelyn Davies [1977].

⁴ Another argument about the family wage concerns the extent to which it was ever pegged to the actual size of a labourer's family. In the main it was not, and only with the intervention of state allowances was some correspondence introduced between numbers of children and size of earnings [cf McIntosh 1979].

A second area of enquiry concerns the extent to which the family in the periphery still retains its role as a unit of production, and the implications this may have in terms of the privatisation of women's labour. The significance of this relates to the assumption that while the family is the unit of production, the privatisation of women's labour is less intense. Although privatisation is an aspect of the social relations between the genders, it is also argued to be an integral part of the development of capitalist relations of production. This process involves the proletarianisation of men and the 'housewifisation' of women, with capital benefitting from women's unremunerated involvement in subsistence production or housework [Bennholdt-Thomsen 1981; Mies 1979]. We would suggest that the distinction between capitalist and non-capitalist gender relations may rest not on the intensity of privatisation, but rather on the form it takes. Privatisation of women's labour in the capitalist system can take the form of not allowing a wife to go out to work, and thereby depriving her of direct access to the market. This does not mean, however, that she does not sell her labour power: on the contrary, large numbers of women do, but without ever becoming directly involved in typical capitalist units of production. A common form of absorption of women into the capitalist labour force is domestic outwork within the home, described by both Goddard and Allen in this *Bulletin*. Not only is this preferred by capitalists who, as in the example of the Naples leather trade, have the advantage of having a docile, fragmented female labour force at their disposition, but it is preferred also by women themselves who, as shown in the UK study, see their primary duty to be to the three generations of kin they often serve. Domestic work of this type involves the transformation of a part of the home into the woman's workplace, whether it be her kitchen, as with Savara's Annapurnas, or her main room, as in Moser's front-room shops. In addition, as Banerjee has shown in her example of high caste Indian women, cultural pressures frequently force women to accept lower-paid work than their skill levels could command simply because it can be done behind the closed doors of the home.

In examples such as these, privatisation of women's labour does not imply that women are not part of the active labour force; its importance lies in the effect it has on the form women's economic participation takes. There is also a subsidiary point to be made. Where there is no direct access to the market, the form of recruitment differs. Women therefore are greatly reliant on kinship links and patron-client relations to get access to either employment or income generating opportunities. This, as Goddard shows, has implications both as to the type of work women may be offered, and the conditions under which they sell their labour. Their reliance of kin for support in turn has implications

for the degree to which they may develop a consciousness of their oppression and exploitation. The problem of the development of consciousness is touched upon by both Banerjee and Savara, and should be an area for future research.

Women as subsidiary workers

The movement of women in and out of the labour force is a complex process which requires the identification and analysis of two sets of relations: the relations of production and relations of gender, at specific historical conjunctures, and their implications in terms of the categories and types of activities in which women are engaged. From the different articles in this *Bulletin* we have identified the following as important factors determining women's economic participation:

- a) the extent to which the labour force is proletarianised and involved in formal wage sector employment;
- b) the extent to which the state assumes responsibility for the reproduction of the labour force through provision of state housing, medical care, child care, education etc;
- c) the extent to which the primary income earner is paid a family wage;
- d) the content of the conjugal contract and nature of the constraints it places on women's economic choices;
- e) the level of development itself and the degree to which housework is labour intensive.

A list such as this does not indicate the form of women's participation itself and the variables affecting this. Yet any analysis of women's work highlights the vertical distribution of women in work categories in which a number of characteristics coincide: part-time, often casual, unskilled, containing a truncated career structure, with weak or non-existent bargaining mechanisms; and in sectors which give little access to economic or political power. Women workers are also distributed horizontally into particular occupations, most obviously into those which can be seen as an extension into the market of domestic labour. Some of the typically female occupations enshrine types of relations which also derive from the domestic realm, perhaps the most characteristic being that of deference, and from the typical form that gender relations within the family take, that of women servicing either male adults or children of either gender. Here it has to be observed that it is difficult to distinguish between the subsidiary quality of women's work which derives from the nature of the work itself, and that which derives from the fact that it is women who do it. As Allen argues, there would appear to be a high degree of congruence between the ideological representation of women as naturally drawn to motherhood, wifehood,

and servicing others; naturally belonging to the realm of the home, the family, the minimal kin group, and their placement in the labour force. Indeed, in some cultures, as Greenstreet shows, the link between a woman and her children is seen as of such a nature that mothers rather than fathers have the duty to maintain 'their' children, although the men may have the duty to provide the means whereby women can carry out their obligations.

The view of women as somehow outside the labour force, outside the mainstream of economic life, and the designation of certain sectors of the economy as women's work, bears the imprint of this ideology. Women consequently tend to be segregated into particular occupations which are carefully delimited by an ideology linking their activity to their gender, with the vast majority, therefore, working in occupations defined as having some structural resemblance to their family role, or which over time has become stigmatised simply because women work in them [Heyzer in this *Bulletin*]. As Milkman has argued, 'sex-typing is an ideological mechanism which denies the existence of any conflict between women's family role and their role in paid labour, blithely labelling both "women's work"' [Milkman 1976].

This occupational segregation based on gender conflicts with the ideal of a fluid labour market which can be rationally shaped by the laws of supply and demand. Such a dynamic has important implications. Does it either marginalise or exclude women as a particular element of the industrial reserve army, or conversely, does it protect certain sectors of the urban economy for women? Even in the formal sector there would appear to be little doubt that the effect is to constitute their wage as secondary or auxiliary: women's wages are typically about 60 per cent of men's, and even in Britain and the United States, despite equal opportunities legislation, this wage differential has not been eroded. Whether women are secondary workers in fact or merely in ideology, women's work cannot be viewed in isolation. Rather it is in relation to the opportunities for male work that the movement of women into the labour force or informal-sector income generating activities, must be understood.

⁵ The household is an analytical concept of rather low level of generality because it is essentially based on a residential criterion: what is generally meant are those people who share a domestic economy (although not necessarily a common fund) most often described as sharing a common cooking pot. Yet in many cases the household is maintained by cash flows coming from persons who are not co-resident (eg remittances from migrants). In most cases too the concept of the household implies a residential group based upon the conjugal pair, although there are certain matrilineal societies in which the husband does not necessarily reside with his wife, but rather with his mother and/or sisters, and where only a small part of his income goes to his family of procreation.

Household vs Individual Survival Strategies

As previously mentioned, in peripheral economies relatively few men are in regular wage employment, and even then they may not be earning a family wage. Consequently, survival strategies are frequently based on the household rather than on the individual.⁵ Households are generally assumed to be based upon a conjugal pair, although in reality this is frequently not the case. Nevertheless, in so far as this provides the template of society, many of the processes discussed above are derived from the notion of the conjugal pair as the constitutive element of social organisation. How then does accepting the household as the basis of the analysis clarify the problem, not so much of the type of work a woman may take up, but rather of the conditions under which she may offer herself on the labour market? Family strategies commonly show that women dovetail their income-earning activities to that of the male householder. Thus a more detailed understanding, both of the dynamics of women's labour force participation, and its relation to capital accumulation, would be obtained by an examination of the totality of the labour market, together with the patterning of labour demand. For instance, identification of the extent to which certain sectors of the economy, particularly those which are relatively labour intensive, are characterised by marked seasonality in demand for labour (eg the construction industry), or by irregularity of demand for the product (eg the garment industry), or by rapid technological developments, or cyclical slumps, might well produce important indicators of the movement of women in and out of the labour force. Knowledge of such a dynamic would be useful to policy-makers concerned with finding ways of supporting the efforts of self-employed and small-scale entrepreneurs.

This approach would also indicate not only the constraints imposed on workers in these economic sectors but also the nature of the strategies adopted by households to surmount seasonal fluctuations in household income. A good example of this is the construction industry, a very large employer of working class men in a great many countries. The industry is seasonal, with most building work undertaken during months free either from cold or freezing weather or excessive rainfall. In the building months numerous men are employed as unskilled and skilled workers (masons, carpenters/joiners). Although wages may be relatively good, rarely are they sufficient for the family to save while the man is working, against the day when he is laid off. During the 'dead season' the man has to turn to other types of work and/or his wife has to substitute for her husband. A common form of dovetailing reported both in peripheral societies today and in the past in England is laundry. In 19th century London, wives of out-of-work coalmen took in washing

during the summer, while in the winter it was the turn of construction workers' wives to do this arduous and poorly paid work [Stedman Jones 1971]. Investigation of both the typical patterns of dovetailing of occupations by men throughout the year (what work do construction workers turn to?), and the dovetailing of men and women's work throughout the year is an important area for future research [Young 1981].

Such an analysis requires a sophisticated understanding of the nature of the labour market throughout the annual cycle, and if elaboration of policy options is one of its aims, it should include longitudinal trends evident in the wider international economy. For example, if the technological revolution in office equipment will increasingly make male clerks redundant, women members of these families may be forced to maintain the family until the male householder finds a new economic niche. What opportunities are available to them? The implications of the erosion of sectors of women's employment under similar conditions may be quite different, but equally grave.

Relations Between the Genders

We have discussed both the privatisation of women's labour that appears to occur under capitalism, and the form that women's labour force participation takes, particularly in the informal sector. The contradictions between the privatisation of women's labour and women's absorption into the labour force at particular stages, both in terms of specific economic conjunctures and of specific points in the life cycle (ie before marriage), highlight the shifts and changes in the relations between capital and the social relations of gender at different stages in the development of capitalism. We have noted that privatisation is an aspect of the relations between the genders, in particular between men and women within the conjugal bond, because it is this relation which sets the internal parameters for the household strategies adopted. The content of this relationship cannot of course be specified according to universal criteria; each culture has its own specific way of separating men from women and joining them again in particular ways, of dividing up their responsibilities and according different values to their different activities. In general, however, there is a very strong association between women and childcare and cooking. Although they well may take economic responsibility, men on the whole do not take day-to-day servicing responsibilities for children. Except in cases of extreme poverty, the care of children shapes and determines the extent to which women can engage in employment or income-earning activities. Even though in many cases women may have access to a variety of kin, neighbours or friends to share the burden of care, this is often on a reciprocal basis.

But there are factors which go beyond the logistics of childcare, and the provision of the evening meal. Moser points to the strong association in Guayaquil of women with a particular social space: that of the home or its immediate neighbourhood, and to a pervasive ideology surrounding the 'correct' behaviour of women who stand in a particular relationship to a man which includes providing him exclusive sexual services. It is frequently the provision of such services which enables a woman to have some call on the man's purse, for while there are strong sanctions against a woman having relations with several men to maximise her bases of support, there are few sanctions restraining men—indeed, in many cultures men expect to have several women providing them with sexual servicing and bearing their children during their lives, and often share their favours with two or more women at one time. Why should women be in this unfavourable position of dependence on men? Clearly one aspect of the unequal power of men and women is the spatial restrictions placed on women and the clear economic repercussions, with men able to exploit higher-return economic niches than women. Another aspect is that men are able to escape from the routine care of children with impunity; they are thus much freer to take on employment or income-generating work which is full-time, possibly involves being away from home for some days, and may have cumulative prospects (such as upgrading from unskilled labourer to the position of supervisor) with concomitant higher economic returns.

Lastly, an important difference between men and women lies in their differential ability to command the labour of others. Goddard notes that men can ask for and expect to get cooperation from a number of members of the family in their enterprises, while women as a rule can count only on other women, and frequently only on younger kinswomen. Moser shows how wives finish certain aspects of their husband's work (taking up hems, making buttonholes) or undertake certain processes (cooking food) not as a partner in a family enterprise but rather as part of their conjugal duties. There are few examples of men, as husbands, having to perform similar tasks (even though they may 'help out' from time to time).

These differences clearly relate to the privatisation of women by men, but in this sense it is not clear that this derives from the logic of capitalist relations as such (although it may be relatively congruent with them). Rather, it would appear to derive from the relations of marriage and kinship through which men, as individuals, can appropriate women, as individuals. Relations between men and women, particularly within the conjugal bond, thus enshrine different power attributes in which women always appear in the lesser position. It is thus the woman who dovetails her work with that of

the man, rather than vice versa. Similarly, as Greenstreet shows, it is daughters who, in having to help their mothers out, get sent out to work at an early age while sons get the first option on the family's (the woman's) savings for their education and advancement.

Highly Competitive Conditions

Under conditions of rapid expansion of employment, men and women may be absorbed into the labour force quite evenly, as far as numbers are concerned, although women still predominate at the lower end of the labour market. But expansion is not a characteristic of most peripheral economies where the few formal sector jobs there are tend to go to men, with women having to crowd in the irregular and casual sectors. Even where a demand for certain types of female labour does develop, such as in the textile and electronics export processing factories [Elson and Pearson 1980], typically the demand is for a very narrow spectrum of women: young, single and, in the case of electronics, educated. Married women still find such relatively stable employment closed to them, and under conditions of acute pressure on wages, including a decline in real wages, of inflation and erosion of public services, not only women, but their children also, may be drawn into whatever sort of paid work is available.

Under highly competitive conditions the poorer sectors of the society have to put onto the market whatever labour they have in order to capture whatever income generating opportunities are available to ensure familial survival. It is under such conditions that the differential power of men and women comes into critical relief, particularly as regards the implications for women's employment. One question that has to be answered is do women in these conditions lose their jobs to men, ie are they pushed out of traditional women's work sectors, or does the 'sexual segregation of occupations create an inflexibility in the labour market which prevents their expulsion during a crisis of contraction'?⁶ [Milkman 1976].

Further research is needed to establish the extent to which there are certain irreducible women's jobs and the underlying dynamic of this irreducibility where it occurs. In particular it would be important to know if certain women's jobs are protected from take-over by men either because men refuse to take them, sometimes preferring other rather extreme options such as emigration, crime, use of physical violence, or because employers erect barriers against them. For example, there are a variety of protective organisations and sanctions, designed to maintain existing gender hierarchy and exclude women's entry into certain economic activities, which leads to a distinct fragmentation of

⁶ Although Milkman is referring to formal sector employment, the comment is equally applicable to the informal sector.

the labour market by gender. In particular, men combine to protect spheres of economic activity which represent a higher return to labour. This has been evident both in the trade union struggles in industrialising Britain (and is the gist of the dilution arguments), as well as in the informal sector in peripheral economies where, for example, women are prevented from entering 'male' economic niches (such as bottle collecting) through ridicule and harassment [see Rusque-Alcaino in Bromley and Gerry 1979]; or the designation of the social spaces where such activities take place as out-of-bounds to 'nice women' [see Goddard and Moser in this *Bulletin*]. Employers on the other hand do, even in situations where the level of male unemployment is very high, elect to employ women for certain tasks [Pearson forthcoming]. In certain Third World countries today multinational electronic, textile and garment companies employ large numbers of women in preference to unemployed men. It is often argued that such employers deliberately create a female workforce because women, especially young women, represent the optimal employee, as much for their higher productivity as for their political quiescence [Herzog 1980; Heyzer 1980; Lim 1978]. Nonetheless it has to be noted that the textile and garment industries have traditionally provided employment for greater numbers of women than men. It is therefore important to establish the extent to which cheaper and supposedly more docile women workers are being *substituted* for men, as well as the degree to which this is really a one-way process.⁷

The effect of severe competition has other implications which are perhaps most strongly indicated in the increasing tendency toward female-headed households in certain peripheral economies [Buvinic and Youssef 1978]. Although there is general agreement that it is in the very poorest couche of society that the majority of female-headed households are to be found, lack of information makes it unclear whether it was poverty in the first instance that made the men drift away, or whether the fact that the men left pushed them into the abysmal depths of poverty recorded in the literature. Single women with children face a labour market structured on the premise that adult women with children, if not dependent upon a man, are at least able to call upon others for economic assistance. Despite the fact that they are single mothers, they still have access only to those forms of income-earning activity with characteristically low returns to labour.

In situations where the state takes little or no responsibility for the reproduction of the labour force by providing forms of the social wage, single mothers, particularly while their children are young, are inevitably in a desperate situation. A further more disquieting implication of this is the extent to which the mother is forced into selling the labour power of her children, however young, in order that she and they may survive at all. Furthermore, her only means of establishing some form of relationship with a man who is not kin, which enables her to call upon his earnings, is sexual servicing. To consolidate the relationship she may have to present him with a child (a sign of her dependence and his virility). As a strategy this has the disadvantage of frequently leaving her worse off than before, with no economic support and yet another mouth to feed.

Gender and Capital

In this article we have been examining some aspects of the relationship between women's work and the form it takes, and the form of capitalist economy operating in many dependent Third World countries. We have, in fact, been more concerned to investigate the dynamic of this relation than to distinguish between what could be described as the direct control of women's labour by capital and indirect forms. That is to say, we have implicitly rejected a rigid conceptual distinction between the informal and formal sectors, and have used these concepts in a purely descriptive way.

We have suggested a number of explanations for the particular form women's work takes within peripheral economies, and have deliberately not stressed purely economic factors. This is in part because the implication of such an analysis must be that the removal of capitalist structures of production will lead to the liberation of women. Yet this has been far from the case in those countries which have undergone a socialist revolution.

We have noted that there are important structures of resistance to the proletarianisation process at work in peripheral economies. One is the ability of people to make use of kinship ties to set themselves up as so-called independent entrepreneurs either producing goods or providing services.⁸ The question of the effects of this tendency to create a sector of petty commodity production based on the kin involved in the enterprises has not been directly confronted: we merely hint at it.

⁷ During a recent visit to Sweden we were told that in the current employment crisis, the nursing profession is gradually becoming masculinised, thanks to the operation of what appeared to be progressive legislation allowing for positive discrimination in favour of people seeking employment in sectors in which either their ethnic group or their gender was under-represented. Women are not however, being substituted for men in overwhelmingly male occupations because so few of them can claim to have equal qualifications.

⁸ We are not arguing that independent entrepreneurs never take up employment as workers in capitalist enterprises: there is a good deal of evidence to show that both men and women will work in factories etc. to earn a target amount of money needed either to set up in independent business, or to expand an already existing business [cf Schmukler 1975]. Goddard also makes it clear that employers are happy to support the attempts of ex-workers to set up on their own, providing them not only with the machines but also with work. See also Schmitz 1981.

However, we would suggest that the ideology of independence, of being-one's-own-boss, may be more readily translatable into practice by men than women, for, as we point out, there are structures deeply embedded within kinship and marriage which work against autonomy and independence for women as women. The effect on women's welfare of small-scale productive enterprises based on family labour is far from clear—in this *Bulletin* some of the negative effects have been indicated. The positive ones are less clear, as are the effects on children. The considerable resistance on the part of young people to parental control is attested in a number of studies.⁹ These are all areas where, we feel, future research is needed.

More clear are the effects of disguised independent production, that is, when capital is more directly involved. In a number of the articles forms of work are discussed which, though frequently described as being informal in the sense that they are unregulated, are nonetheless highly organised. They enable capitalists to throw off certain costs, or risks and uncertainties, in a highly competitive market (and thus ensure a more adequate rate of capital accumulation, or possibly stave off imminent bankruptcy or continuing losses). This is the dynamic behind the fragmentation of the labour process and the subcontracting of certain aspects of production or distribution to types of enterprises often held to characterise the informal sector (small-scale, poorly capitalised enterprises employing predominantly family labour), or indeed directly to households. In many cases it seems that it is precisely the differing access of the genders to the market that makes it possible for capital to seize upon these divisions among the poorest sectors of society and to install productive processes within the heart of the family unit, thus enabling the extraction of absolute surplus value through the piece-rate system. As Goddard notes, men may become independent entrepreneurs, owners of small workshops and employers of small numbers of workers, but women rarely achieve such heights of pseudo-autonomy. Rather they become *par excellence* that labour force upon which the male entrepreneur depends for his success. This would be unremarkable (indeed some writers consider that this, the so-called family mode of production, should be given financial and policy support—cf Lipton 1980) were it not for the differential access of the genders to the power to distribute and enjoy the rewards of such family production. Furthermore, the costs of such modes of operation are frequently very high in terms of physical, psychological and social well-being.

The question of which gender bears the brunt of such destructive working conditions is not an idle one,

particularly if and when it is women who are also mothers who are forced to accept them and even encourage their children to participate, despite the heavy costs. The future generations laid waste by the hunger of capital for higher rates of accumulation are yet to be known. The present victims of its rapacity are all too frequently women, and this because of the failure of policy-makers and others to recognise that differential access to economic and social resources, and consequently to power, exists within society not only between classes but also between men and women. The challenge that must be faced is, is it possible to get rid of the inequities inherent in capitalism while ignoring those inherent in patriarchy.

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⁹ A number of the papers given at the Child Labour Workshop (IDS, 5-8 January 1981) noted the forms of children's resistance to parental control over their labour and their earnings.

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