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Article in *Feminist Economics* · July 2003

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GLOBALIZATION AND WOMEN'S PAID WORK: EXPANDING FREEDOM?

Christine M. Koggel

ABSTRACT

In *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen takes expanding freedom to be the primary end and the principal means of development. I discuss his emphasis on women's agency as central to development theory and practice and the strategies he advocates for enhancing it. Recent work in feminist economics and postcolonial studies tests Sen's complex account of freedom. Further levels of complexity need to be added when we examine how global forces of power interact with local systems of oppression in ways that often limit women's freedom. This argument rests on an analysis of how globalization affects a domain of freedom that is a central concern for Sen, that of increasing women's freedom to work outside the home as a way of strengthening their agency. Attending to elements missing in Sen's account will enhance freedom in women's lives.

KEYWORDS

Amartya Sen, globalization, freedom, agency, women's paid work,
postcolonial feminist studies

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has reshaped many issues: international relations, population growth, development, human rights, the environment, labor, healthcare, and poverty, among others. It has increased our awareness of the profound ways in which policies and practices in one region can affect the livelihoods of people in other regions, and even in the world as a whole. Recent research in ethics explores the implications of globalization as it affects these and many other areas of inquiry. Some of the products of this philosophical inquiry are the evolution of a language of human rights; attempts to formulate a global ethic; accounts of cross-cultural judgment and interpretation; and research on development ethics. In this context, feminist economics and Third World, postcolonial, and global studies have been vitally important for highlighting the need to be aware of power relations at both the global and local levels when providing accounts of development processes and

policies.¹ These theorists argue that many of these processes and policies have had a detrimental impact on women in domains such as the workplace, education, and healthcare, and in terms of their social, political, and economic status and participation. This work is reshaping both the conceptual terrain of these issues and the policies being framed by national and international organizations.

Amartya Sen opens *Development as Freedom* by acknowledging this global context of increasingly close linkages of trade, communication, and ideas across countries and the conditions of “unprecedented opulence” and “remarkable deprivation, destitution, and oppression” that coexist both within countries and across rich and poor countries (Amartya Sen 1999: xi). In fact, Sen provides a rather dismal picture of contemporary life: “persistence of poverty and unfulfilled elementary needs, occurrence of famines and widespread hunger, violation of elementary political freedoms as well as of basic liberties, extensive neglect of the interests and agency of women, and worsening threats to our environment and to the sustainability of our economic and social lives” (Sen 1999: xi). A central goal of development theory and policy is to address these problems that are made all the more stark (and some would say even sustained) by the unprecedented opulence in other parts of the world. Sen’s solution is to take the expansion of freedom or the removal of various types of unfreedoms “both as the primary end and as the principal means of development” (Sen 1999: xii). Development, he writes, “consists of the removal of various types of unfreedom that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency” (Sen 1999: xii). Sen further argues that giving *women* freedom to exercise their agency should be a key goal of development policy:

The extensive reach of women’s agency is one of the more neglected areas of development studies, and most urgently in need of correction. Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women. This is indeed a crucial aspect of ‘development as freedom.’

(Sen 1999: 203)

Before proceeding, I want to clarify my approach by making two points. First, as shown in the section that follows, Sen provides a complex account of the interconnectedness of various kinds of freedom. He argues that increasing women’s freedom to work outside the home is crucial for increasing their freedom in domains such as the home, healthcare, education, reproductive control, and social and political life. Clearly, women’s long and continued exclusion from the workforce has limited their freedom, and Sen’s work in drawing connections between the freedom to work and other sorts of freedoms is important not only to

development theory but to feminist theory more generally. My argument is not that women's workforce participation should not be promoted or that increasing their freedom in this domain does not have a positive impact on their freedom in other domains. Rather I raise questions about whether paid employment necessarily increases women's freedom and agency in all places and, specifically, under conditions of globalization. Second, there has been a longstanding debate about whether paid work necessarily improves the status and material standard of women and the circumstances that make this situation more or less likely. This debate has encompassed related issues such as the family wage and the double shift.² In this paper, I discuss some of these nonliberating aspects, but my focus is on women's paid work in the current context of globalization. If not entirely absent in Sen's account, power and oppression are not sufficiently recognized as factors of inequality in women's lives that are relevant to the kinds of policies required, at both the global and local levels, for increasing women's freedom and agency.

I. WOMEN'S AGENCY AND WELL-BEING

Sen understands freedom to be the end as well as the means of development, in the sense that progress is evaluated in terms of whether freedoms are enhanced and whether enhancing freedom is effective for achieving development:

[d]evelopment has to be more concerned with enhancing the lives we lead and the freedoms we enjoy. Expanding the freedoms we have reason to value not only makes our lives richer and more unfettered, but also allows us to be fuller social persons, exercising our own volitions and interacting with – and influencing – the world in which we live.

(Sen 1999: 14–15)

According to Sen, development theorists need to view various kinds of freedom (political, economic, and social) as inextricably interconnected, and they also need to know about the empirical connections that obtain when policies that limit freedom in one domain decrease freedoms in other domains: “[e]conomic unfreedom can breed social unfreedom, just as social or political unfreedom can also foster economic unfreedom” (Sen 1999: 8). Paying attention to kinds and levels of freedom, argues Sen, allows us to be sensitive to the ways in which human diversity and the particularities of social practices and political contexts affect one's ability to satisfy basic needs, perform various human functions, and live lives reflective of human flourishing.

Another vital aspect of Sen's theory of development is that he shifts the focus from people as patients of development to people as agents of development processes and change:

... this freedom-centered understanding of economics and of the process of development is very much an agent-oriented view. With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other. They need not be seen primarily as passive recipients of the benefits of cunning development programs. There is indeed a strong rationale for recognizing the positive role of free and sustainable agency.

(Sen 1999: 11)

In Chapter 8 of his *Development as Freedom*, Sen distinguishes strategies for promoting women's well-being from strategies that promote women's agency. The former is welfarist in the sense that women are treated as the passive recipients of policies designed to remove inequalities and achieve better conditions for them. An agency approach takes women to be active agents who themselves promote and achieve social and political transformations that can then better the lives of both women and men. Sen acknowledges that the two approaches overlap, since agency strategies have the goal of removing inequalities that affect women's well-being and well-being strategies need to draw on women's agency to effect real changes. However, Sen argues that distinguishing the two is important because treating a person as an agent is fundamentally different from treating him or her as a patient: "[u]nderstanding the agency role is thus central to recognizing people as responsible persons: not only are we well or ill, but also we act or refuse to act, and can choose to act one way rather than another" (Sen 1999: 190).

Sen views the promotion of women's agency as vital not only for improving the economic and social power of women, but for challenging and changing entrenched values and social practices that support gender bias in the distribution of basic goods such as food and healthcare and in the treatment of women and girls within families. He then makes the strong claim that the "changing agency of women is one of the major mediators of economic and social change, and its determination as well as consequences closely relate to many of the central features of the development process" (Sen 1999: 202).

On the face of it, feminists could hardly quarrel with Sen's emphasis on the promotion of women's agency as a way of enhancing their well-being. After all, what better way for well-being to be measured than to have it within women's control as active agents and placed in the context of women's lives? Yet Sen's account of agency involves more than giving women the power to make their own decisions regarding reproduction or childcare, to change the gendered division of labor, and to improve female access to healthcare in their own social and political contexts. He uses empirical studies to substantiate and defend particular policies for increasing women's freedom and agency. He argues that agency in the

above-mentioned domains is integrally connected with freedoms in other domains such as the freedom to work outside the home: "freedom in one area (that of being able to work outside the household) seems to help foster freedom in others (enhancing freedom from hunger, illness, and relative deprivation)" (Sen 1999: 194).

Sen notes that in general terms, empirical data show that women's well-being is strongly influenced by "women's ability to earn an independent income, to find employment outside the home, to have ownership rights and to have literacy and be educated participants in decisions inside and outside the family" (Sen 1999: 191).³ These abilities are aspects of agency in that women are *doing* things and making choices that then give them voice, social standing, independence, and empowerment. In Sen's own words on the case of paid employment:

... working outside the home and earning an independent income tend to have a clear impact on enhancing the social standing of a woman in the household and the society. Her contribution to the prosperity of the family is then more visible, and she also has more voice, because of being less dependent on others. Further, outside employment often has useful 'educational' effects, in terms of exposure to the world outside the household, thus making her agency more effective.

(Sen 1999: 192)

My purpose is not to critically analyze the data Sen uses or all of the policies he suggests, but to focus on the connection he makes between promoting women's workforce participation and increasing their agency. For, as soon as we note that doing paid work outside the home is a key policy in his account, we are led to ask: does this necessarily increase women's agency and well-being? What factors might affect the outcome? Among possible factors could be whether women's paid work is located inside or outside the home; whether they have sole responsibility for domestic work in addition to their paid work; whether they work in the formal or informal sector; whether other family members have control over their income; whether the labor market permits high or low earnings; and whether jobs provide safety and leave provisions or control over conditions of work. These factors, which vary from location to location, have an impact on women's agency in local contexts as well as in the global context of multinational corporations. My aim is to examine global factors in more detail to understand how multinational corporations, for example, operate in specific local contexts in ways that sometimes enhance, but often limit, women's freedom and agency. The central question in my analysis thus becomes: is Sen's account sufficiently discerning of the ways in which global forces of power and local systems of oppression operate and interact in ways that limit women's freedom and agency even when they have paid work?

II. WOMEN'S PAID WORK AND THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Sen's account, as noted, is rooted in empirical analysis, sensitive to the particularities of issues and policies, appreciative of diverse human needs and abilities, and responsive to various social conditions and political contexts. Yet there is reason to worry that there is still something missing, particularly when we examine the issue of women's workforce participation in the context of globalization. A good place to draw out the implications of this examination is with Chandra Mohanty's work. She examines both the local and the global aspects of oppressive conditions in women's lives. Thinking globally means being aware of the ways in which women's work is shaped by the contemporary arena of global corporations, markets, and capitalism. She notes:

Third-World women workers (defined in this context as both women from the geographical Third World and immigrant and indigenous women of color in the U.S. and Western Europe) occupy a specific social location in the international division of labor which *illuminates* and *explains* crucial features of the capitalist processes of exploitation and domination. These are features of the social world that are usually obfuscated or mystified in discourses about the 'progress' and 'development' (e.g., the creation of jobs for poor, Third-World women as the markers of economic and social advancement) that is assumed to 'naturally' accompany the triumphal rise of global capitalism.

(Chandra Mohanty 1997: 7, her emphasis)

Mohanty's description of discourses about progress and development suggests that providing women with jobs *may* be as inadequate a measure of economic and social advancement as are increases in the GNP or income levels. One of the reasons for this, according to Mohanty, is global capitalism itself and the processes of exploitation and domination generated by it.

Multinational corporate executives and financial institutions are motivated by increasing profits and decreasing costs, not by improving women's workforce participation or their freedom and agency. The drive to decrease costs means that particular women are recruited into specific kinds of jobs, but it does not mean that these women have choices that effectively change their levels of freedom. However, I want to temper the strong connection that Mohanty makes between global capitalism and exploitation by suggesting that women's paid work in a global context has mixed effects. It can provide opportunities for work not otherwise available to women in specific contexts, but it can and often does provide less than ideal work conditions. The complexity of factors relevant to a description of global corporations and their operations in specific locations means that opportunities for and conditions of work can change in both the short

and long term. Yet while Mohanty can be said to ignore the positive aspects of global markets and corporations, she does pay attention to the details of women's lives at the local level. Her account, therefore, makes room for a more complex and sophisticated analysis (than she herself provides) of the sorts of global and local factors that can determine the kind of impact that increased workforce participation has on women's freedom and agency.

Mohanty, and the work of feminist economists on which she draws, rejects ahistorical and universal accounts of experiences shared by women, whether Third World women or all women in the workforce, and instead allows commonalities to emerge from detailed descriptions of the lives of working women in specific social contexts. Thus measuring women's increased participation in the workplace does not give us the whole story about the effect on their well-being or agency. For a fuller picture, we need to take account of the many barriers to women's freedom and agency, even when their participation in the workforce is permitted or increased, by examining not only the global context, but also the embeddedness of women's work in localized social practices and political institutions. Recognition of various forces of power at the global level is never far away in the analysis of the local.

Two of Mohanty's studies provide useful leads. In the first, Mohanty uses Maria Mies's work to analyze local systems of oppression affecting the working lives of the lace-makers of Narsapur in Andhra Pradesh, a state in south India. The second considers implications of Mohanty's discussion of electronics workers in the First World context of the Silicon Valley in California (USA) and demonstrates how multinational corporations often make use of gendered and racialized meanings in particular locations in ways that can limit rather than increase women's freedom and agency in the workplace and other domains. Highlighting local factors in the first example and global factors in the second serves to illustrate features of each. However, the descriptions also show that the local and the global cannot but intersect in the contemporary context of globalization.

The account of women's agency that emerges from these descriptions is inherently complex. Local and global factors and their interactions are not static, but are subject to changes in markets, economic conditions, labor demands, and so on. Whether change is possible depends on various factors, including the entrenchment of local gender norms, as illustrated by the example of lace-making in Narsapur. Moreover, even as women experience negative effects on their freedom in the workplace, there can be changes in gender norms and improvements in other spheres of women's lives, as illustrated by the example of electronics workers. A proper assessment of whether women's freedom and agency is improved or diminished needs these complex descriptions of local and global factors and their intersections in particular locations at particular times.

As Maria Mies describes it, understanding the exploitative working conditions of the lace-makers in Narsapur requires understanding the power exercised by social norms in this location. Beliefs about women's proper sphere and the devaluation of their activity in the home, entrenched in this region's cultural practices, are not easily eliminated when women are allowed to "work." For the lace-makers, caste and gender work to transform beliefs about women's unequal status and power in a private sphere into a hierarchical ordering in which women's work in the production of lace is conceptualized as "leisure activity" with little pay, and where the products and proceeds of this industry are controlled by men. Mies demonstrates that the expansion of the lace industry into the global market "led not only to class differentiation within particular communities (Christians, Kapus) but also to the masculinization of all nonproduction jobs, especially of trade, and the total feminization of the production process. ... Men sell women's products and live on the profits from women's work" (Maria Mies 1982: 10). This gendered division of labor coupled with the conceptualization of lace-making as leisure, rather than as work, means that women have no control over their work hours or conditions of work, or even the proceeds of their "leisure" activity. In addition to their labor-intensive work of caring for families and maintaining households, they work six to eight hours a day making lace in confined spaces with poor lighting and little pay. Furthermore, this "leisure activity" is perceived as befitting the women's membership in a caste that promotes women's seclusion in the home as a status symbol. These women are both perceived as and perceive themselves as being of higher status than women who belong to castes of poor peasants or agricultural laborers. These local beliefs about proper gender and caste roles, and women's isolation from one another (because they are home-based), converge to prevent lace-makers from organizing to improve their conditions. They also cause the women themselves to cling to these symbols of higher status, even though women agricultural laborers of lower castes earn "considerably more in the course of a year than the lace workers" (Mies 1982: 15).

At the very least, this description tempers optimism about substantive gains to these women's freedom and agency, in either the private or public sphere, when they are permitted to join the workforce. What makes the case of lace-makers particularly problematic is that no one, not even the workers themselves, perceive them to be in the workforce. The conditions of their work are not only a function of globalized markets in lace, but also of their home-based work that makes them virtually invisible. The number of women dispersed throughout homes in many areas is high, and yet they do not count in labor statistics, where workers are those who earn a living outside the home. It is the men who control the industry and do the visible activities of buying and selling. In this example, the local details matter for an analysis of work and of *this* gendered and caste division of labor in which

all the power is in the hands of those who control the markets, the capital, and the returns from the sales.⁴ Here women are placed at the lowest and least visible part of the chain of a global industry and market in place. Counting them as workers in local and international statistics on labor could of course make them visible in terms of numbers, but this in itself cannot change women's oppressive work conditions, for which other strategies would be needed, as discussed in Section III. Indeed, entrenched beliefs about gender and caste shape these women's lives in ways that limit their freedom and agency well beyond factors that could easily be measured in statistical reports on labor. Having "paid work" may do little to promote women's agency if work is inside the home and invisible and if income is appropriated by male heads of households.

The case of women workers in the Silicon Valley in California is different in that these women do perceive themselves to be workers and are also perceived to be so by others. Mohanty (1997) reports that in the 1980s, 80 to 90 percent of the laborer jobs on the shop floor of electronics factories in the Silicon Valley were held by women, half of which again were held by Asian immigrant women. She explains that Third World women's overrepresentation was the result of their being targeted and recruited into these underpaid jobs. The explanation, she notes:

lies in the redefinition of work as temporary, supplementary, and unskilled, in the construction of women as mothers and homemakers, and in the positioning of femininity as contradictory to factory work. In addition, the explanation also lies in the specific definition of Third-World, immigrant women as docile, tolerant, and satisfied with substandard wages.

(Mohanty 1997: 18)

Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson's (1981) early research on women workers in the electronics industry of Southeast Asia throws light on the widespread beliefs within these industries about differences in the innate capacities of men and women and their income needs.

Women are considered not only to have naturally nimble fingers, but also to be naturally more docile and willing to accept tough work discipline, and naturally more suited to tedious, repetitious, monotonous work. Their lower wages are attributed to their secondary status in the labor market which is seen as a natural consequence of their ability to bear children.

(Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson 1981: 149)

Evidence shows that these widespread beliefs about women play a role at all levels of upper and middle management, human resource departments, immediate supervisors, husbands and relatives, and the women themselves in ways that explain the recruitment of Asian immigrant women into jobs in

California's Silicon Valley as well as the conditions of work that obtain in them. The effect of defining this work as temporary, unskilled, and tedious legitimizes entrapping these women into low-paying jobs, in which work conditions prevent them from engaging in union activity, political struggle, or collective action, activities that could change the exploitation and domination they face. Such systems of oppression that utilize gender and racial stereotypes structure the meaning and conditions of work for these electronic factory workers—and potentially, global perceptions as well.

Elisabeth Fussell's (2000) study of the rise of the female maquiladora labor force in Tijuana, Mexico, shows how multinational corporations operate in Third World countries to keep production costs and wages lower than in First World countries, often because of less rigid labor laws. Fussell points out that since the 1970s, "when global trade began to intensify, new production and labor-control technologies and competition between low-wage production zones combined to make the cost of labor the most variable component of production" (Elisabeth Fussell 2000: 60). To attract multinational corporations and under pressure through NAFTA, the Mexican government implemented policies such as the dismantling of independent labor unions and the lowering of maquiladora wages to the "lowest of developing countries with strong export marketing sectors" (Fussell 2000: 64).

In Tijuana, Mexican women, who are already perceived and perceive themselves as secondary wage earners supplementing men's wages, become ready suppliers of low-wage labor. Fussell defends feminist economists who have argued that there is deterioration rather than improvement in women's opportunities and agency precisely because "maquiladora employers attract a sector of the female labor force with low levels of human capital and a great need for stable employment which willingly accepts the low wages offered by the maquiladoras" (Fussell 2000: 63). The opportunities in this area, in other words, are restricted to a specific segment of women workers—those able to run the smallest risk of losing their jobs. As Fussell points out, "[b]eing 25 or older, having a child younger than 5, and having less than a primary level of education increase women's probability of maquiladora employment" (Fussell 2000: 73). These women are perceived to be and have proved to be docile and accepting of the challenges demanded by tedious assembly processes. They are less likely to risk losing their jobs through labor resistance than those who are more qualified and more likely to demand higher wages and better working conditions. Fussell argues that if there was ever any potential to improve the lives of women in Mexico by providing them with jobs, it has been "lost to the search for low wages and a flexible labor force" (Fussell 2000: 60). One could argue that the maquiladoras hire precisely those most in need of employment, those who would otherwise be worse off. Yet the descriptions of recruitment and work conditions highlight the ways in

which corporate interests conspired to "take advantage of women's disadvantages" (Fussell 2000: 75) and "diminished the earnings potential of women employed in the maquiladoras" (Fussell 2000: 76).

In the abstract, maquiladoras provide job opportunities and promote national economic development. They fit the description of places that integrate women into the workforce, a goal that Sen argues is a way of increasing women's freedom and agency. However, a closer examination of how multinational corporations, with a vested interest in maximizing profits and minimizing costs, use entrenched meanings of gender and class casts doubt on the promise of workforce participation as necessarily improving the well-being or agency of these women.⁵ In Sen's terms, these women would *seem* to be passive actors rather than active agents seeking to change their work conditions. If we question the motivations of corporate employers who seek to maximize gains by utilizing specific features of labor markets in Third World countries, then we must also question whether these women are truly the recipients of policies designed to remove inequalities and achieve better working conditions. We need to know about these factors at both the local and global levels to make proper assessments of the effects on women's freedom and agency, including factors that can have positive effects.

So far I have concentrated on the negative effects that global markets and multinational corporations can have on women's freedom and agency in particular locations. Global and local factors change, sometimes in ways that can improve women's work conditions. Tighter labor markets, for example, can give workers in some places at some times more bargaining power to negotiate improved wages and better working conditions. As Linda Lim points out, "more and more men are being employed by newly established maquiladoras (export-oriented factories), which are unable to recruit sufficient women due to the export industry boom and resultant tightening labor market in this region" (Linda Lim 1990: 108). More recently, there are reports that many of these factories in the Tijuana belt are closing as multinationals find cheaper labor elsewhere.⁶ These are factors that could change the analysis provided in the studies by Fussell and Elson and Pearson. But there is also more serious criticism of these studies.

Lim emphasizes that these studies only focus on the negative impact of these jobs on women's freedom and agency: "feminists who see patriarchy and gender subordination as crucial underpinnings and inevitable consequences of all capitalism refuse to recognize any benefits to women in the Third World from employment in export factories, insisting that such employment intensifies rather than alleviates their gender subordination" (Lim 1990: 116). She adds:

The predominant stereotype is that First World multinational factories located in the Third World export-processing zones employ mostly

young, single, female rural–urban migrants, who are ruthlessly exploited in harsh factory environments where they suffer long hours, poor working conditions, insecure, unhealthy, and unsafe jobs, and wages so low that they are not even sufficient to cover individual subsistence.

(Lim 1990: 111)

Lim does not claim that poor working conditions do not exist in some areas. They were particularly evident when export factories were established. Rather, she makes two points. The first is that changes to labor and market demands can change workforce composition. The second point is about the “tendency to generalize from ... observations in one particular location at one time” (Lim 1990: 113), a tendency that often ignores the ways in which women are changing their lives even as they experience the negative impact of work conditions. Lim defends a dynamic historical approach, one that highlights the importance of being sensitive to changes in local and global factors when reading accounts of women’s work. She has us pay attention, for example, to the ways in which *having* employment, where none was available previously, affects “women workers’ lives and their position in and relations with their families” (Lim 1990: 114). This dynamic approach endorses an account of women as agents, who, in the process of interacting with and reacting to changing local and global factors, themselves reshape meanings and therefore change the conditions of their own lives.

Pearson has responded to Lim’s critique by agreeing that her collaborative work with Elson failed to acknowledge the force of a dynamic approach:

in our desire to pursue the implications for gender positioning of the new geography of women’s labour we were ignoring the ways in which that experience continually reformulated specific women’s gender identities and the ways in which women were active agents in the interaction between capital accumulation and traditional forms of gender identities.

(Ruth Pearson 1998: 180)

This concession does not reject descriptions of the negative impact of multinational corporations in places like Tijuana, but it recognizes the importance of avoiding homogenizing, static, and generalized approaches. María Fernández-Kelly demonstrates these principles when she reports her experiences of applying for jobs and working inside *maquiladoras*. She argues that even as women have limited potential to change the conditions of their work, they are challenging and changing “conventional mores and values regarding femininity” (María Fernández-Kelly 1997: 215) that have prevailed in Mexican society.

III. LESSONS FOR DEVISING POLICY

Generally, enabling women to work outside the home increases their freedom in other domains. Sen's analysis appears to show that there are improvements in domains such as women's access to healthcare, education, and birth control when women are allowed to enter the workplace. But what lessons can be learned from the detailed descriptions of what women's work is actually like? One is that descriptions of women's work in particular contexts complicates Sen's general strategy of advocating work outside the home. If agency enables women to make choices and *do* things that then give them voice, social standing, independence, and empowerment in both the public and private spheres, then care is needed in advocating for women's work participation as a sure way of increasing their freedom and agency. Another lesson is that we must pay attention to the global and the local, as well as to the impact of the global on the local. The weaving together of the analyses by Mohanty, Mies, Fussell, Pearson, Elson, and Lim provides a two-pronged critique of Sen's account. These consist of the local and global, and the critique requires tracing the interconnections between global forces of power and local systems of oppression to achieve a more extensive analysis of women's freedom and agency than that provided by Sen.

Consider, for instance, the local factors of power and oppression and their frequent shaping by global forces. Multinational corporations have relatively easy entry into most countries in the world, and they often shape freedom and agency at the local level. While capital and multinational corporations are highly mobile, labor is much less so. Also, labor is often key in maximizing profits and minimizing costs, which explains why multinational corporations seek to move quickly across borders at the expense of the relative immobility of labor. The *maquiladoras* in Tijuana illustrate how these features of local labor markets are employed by multinational corporations. They also illustrate how gender, race, and class are understood, defined, and used in specific locations to meet local and global demands for labor. Multinational corporations can determine not only who gets to work and what work they do, but also the social norms and the perceptions regarding workers and work itself. Unlike the lace-makers in South India, *maquiladora* women in Mexico are perceived to be and perceive themselves to be workers, but they are secondary wage workers with little or no freedom to choose the kind of jobs they want and little or no agency to change their working conditions. This is not to deny some of the benefits. Rather an awareness of the complex features of local and global conditions helps us recognize what spaces women have to negotiate and implement policies that alleviate the negative effects on their freedom and agency. For example, women workers who challenge conventional norms of femininity are also positioned to challenge the double shift of

adding work outside the home to caring for children by, for example, pressing for daycare facilities. These changes can in turn positively affect freedoms in other areas such as health and education.

Other examples of women's work point to features of importance at the local level. Apart from conservative social norms, such factors as high unemployment, environmental disasters, persistent poverty, political corruption, civil unrest, and the absence of labor protection laws can all affect the exploitation of workers by local employers. Accounting for these factors would temper Sen's claim that there is a strong or inevitable link between increasing women's workforce participation and increasing their levels of freedom and agency in domains such as the home, reproductive decisions, and the equitable distribution of food, healthcare, and education within families.

Also, global forces of power often interact with local conditions in ways that shape levels of freedom and agency at the local level. Increasing women's freedom through work outside the home can fail as a general policy if pre-existing local conditions are disadvantageous. This is particularly likely where multinational corporations can prevent workers from organizing, challenging, and changing oppressive and exploitative work conditions. It can also fail as a general policy if the interests of multinational corporations, trade agreements such as NAFTA, or the rise and fall of its currency, rather than the interests of its least advantaged citizens, dictate the host government's policy. Again, I do not deny the importance of increasing women's freedom to work. Rather, I emphasize that recognition of the complex, unpredictable effects of these forces on the lives and conditions of women in particular regions is missing in Sen's account.

If transformations are to be truly in terms of increasing women's agency, we need to contextualize them by looking at the particular activities of multinational corporations and their disempowering effects on people in specific contexts. We need to know about the particularities of gender inequalities and injustices and the ways in which race, class, ethnicity, and so on intersect, shape, and sustain relations of power. Such detailed descriptions would reveal that advocating increased workforce participation is not sufficient for a meaningful improvement of women's freedom and agency in all places, and that there may be losses to freedom in some domains even as freedom may be increased in others. Analyses and critiques need to be multi-pronged and conducted at both local and global levels, and policies need to be multifaceted if genuine improvements to women's freedom and agency are to be obtained.

Descriptions of women's work at the local level also highlight the importance of acting locally so that power is transferred to those affected by oppressive norms and practices. Sen supports the idea that control of work needs to be in women's hands. He strongly advocates the promotion of

women's agency and provides examples of the successful organizing and managing of businesses and bank loans by women in India (Sen 1999: 200–2). The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), for example, has succeeded in enabling thousands of Indian women to “cut out some middleman activity and to command higher prices for their products in local, regional, and international markets” (Marilyn Carr, Martha Chen, and Jane Tate 2000: 138).⁷ But the work of SEWA involves more than this, as Sen notes when he writes that it has been “most effective in bringing about a changed climate of thought, not just more employment for women” (Sen 1999: 116). Further, I would argue that the work of grassroots organizations such as SEWA illuminates how theory and policy need to be multifaceted to be effective. It shows that grassroots organizations themselves need to be vigilant about the ways in which the policies they advocate or put in place can be used, undermined, or reshaped by markets and corporate interests at the global level or even by their own governments.

Governments, for example, might promote women's employment when they need workers (say, as dictated by global markets), but these programs can be quickly withdrawn with shifts in global market conditions or in the local economy. Women's freedom to work can disappear when a multinational corporation decides to move its factories to minimize costs or to avoid government policies detrimental to its profit-maximizing interests. Women's freedom to work can also decline under pressure from religious and cultural groups or through a change in government. Or, women's work can be made invisible or rendered irrelevant in standard accounts of economic participation. These factors and many others need to be taken into account in devising strategies for increasing women's freedom and agency via employment.

At the global level, as suggested earlier, bodies such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) have a role to play in shaping policy regarding work conditions as well as in defining who counts as a worker by revising data-gathering procedures. Sen describes the ILO as the “custodian of workers' rights within the United Nations system” (Sen 2001: 33). He discusses his own work with the ILO and calls on it to implement an approach that is sensitive to diverse needs and context, but at the same time global and universalist:

A universalist understanding of work and working relations can be linked to a tradition of solidarity and commitment. The need for invoking such a global approach has never been stronger than it is now. The economically globalizing world, with all its opportunities as well as problems, calls for a similarly globalized understanding of the priority of decent work and of its manifold demands on economic, political and social arrangements.

(Sen 2001: 43)

While the role that organizations such as the ILO can play in formulating these policies is clearly important, we need to be clear about what is really needed for a globalized understanding, particularly when it involves women's work. As Lourdes Benería's (1982) research shows, women's "work" is often invisible or not valued because it does not fit the model of commodity production and market exchange that has dominated economic analysis. Economic analysis can, of course, be improved by better data, and Benería claims that some progress has occurred in terms of gathering data that interprets women's work as economic activity rather than leisure or private sphere activities. This includes housework, subsistence agricultural work, and home-based work (Lourdes Benería 1982: 120). But better economic analysis also needs a link with more gender-sensitive policies. The case of lace-makers in India nicely illustrates Benería's point that women's work and their participation in economic activities can be performed without ever leaving the home. As noted earlier, this work is perceived as leisure activity, even though women are carrying the double burden of domestic work and making products for the global market, all in a private sphere where their work is invisible and the returns from it are controlled by men. Features of the global market in lace and their interaction with this local system lead to this work neither increasing women's participation in the public sphere nor enhancing their freedom and agency in the private sphere. But this example also illustrates why simply improving the definitions of work and the collection of data on labor is not enough. Policies will not work if they are too general, rely too heavily on the power and goodwill of international organizations, or are not combined with local strategies for challenging the gendered, racialized, and class divisions of labor.

Carr, Chen, and Tate advocate four interrelated and multidirectional strategies in the case of home-based work: (1) research and statistical studies "to document the number, contribution, and working conditions of home-based workers and to assess the impact of globalization on them"; (2) action programs "to help home-based workers gain access to—and bargain effectively within—labor and product markets (both local and global)"; (3) grassroots organizations "to increase the visibility and voice of home-based workers and other women workers in the informal sector"; and (4) policy dialogues "to promote an enabling work and policy environment for home-based women workers" (Carr, Chen, and Tate 2000: 137). They give substance to their policy proposals by describing the work of several women's organizations, SEWA, HomeNet, and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), whose work at both local and global levels illustrates their strategy. In 1997 these organizations formed a coalition, Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), "comprised of grassroots organizations, research institutions, and international development agencies concerned with improving the

conditions and advancing the status of women in the informal sector” (Carr, Chen, and Tate 2000: 141).

Strategies that make use of the resources of national and international bodies to counteract disempowerment and exploitation experienced by women will be important. Especially in contexts where very large percentages of the female labor force are in the low-paying end of the informal sector, we need grassroots organizing not only for assessing and minimizing the negative impact of multinational corporations and global markets on women's work, but also for putting mechanisms in place to protect earnings at the local level. SEWA, for example, has a system that protects informal sector savings from being appropriated by husbands or other family members. Grassroots organizations can put pressure on national and international organizations to implement or change labor laws that exclude women from being protected from the exploitative working conditions. For such policies to be effective, then, as Sen rightly argues, national and international bodies need to be committed to enhancing well-being and quality of life. But they also need to engage in multifaceted strategies and policies that generate meaningful improvements to women's agency and freedom in particular contexts.

IV. CONCLUSION

Sen rightly argues that allowing people “the freedom to lead lives that they have reason to value” means removing unfreedoms such as malnutrition, premature morbidity, disease, unemployment, and political oppression. Sen urges those interested in alleviating the suffering caused by conditions of poverty, famine, and the destruction and degradation of the environment to attend less to income levels, GDP measures, technological advancements, and industrialization, and more to helping an individual live a healthy, meaningful life. In the face of the objection that Sen's account is too complex and perhaps difficult to embrace as anything other than an ideal,⁸ I have defended its complexity and argued for engaging with even greater levels of complexity. Informed discussion of development processes and policies must include accounts of global forces of power and their intersection with and utilization of local systems of oppression. These factors are particularly evident in the area of women's work and have a direct impact on women's freedom and agency in this and other domains. Taking these factors into account expands the discussion of freedom in *Development as Freedom* and identifies further barriers to women's freedom and agency in addition to those that Sen highlights.

There is no single effect of economic globalization on women's participation in the workforce or on their freedom and agency. Sen concentrates on the positive impact of women's increased workforce participation on their freedom and agency. I do not dispute such a

potential positive impact, but the potential negative impact must also be recognized. Women's freedom and agency are not always improved when they enter the workforce, and merely increasing women's workforce participation is not an adequate development policy. The dynamic relationship between grassroots activities and national and international policy shows how women's agency can effect positive change, even as women grapple with the negative effects of local and global conditions on their lives.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers, to the three guest editors of this Special Issue, and to the participants of the Oxford Workshop (September 11–13, 2002) for their many useful comments and suggestions. Ingrid Robeyns' feedback and support, Jane Humphries' attention to background literature, and Bina Agarwal's detailed comments and input were especially important to this process. I would also like to thank all those who raised challenging questions at conferences where earlier drafts of this paper were presented, particularly Jay Drydyk, Sue Campbell, Kai Nielsen, Nelleke Bak, Colin Macleod, Sue Sherwin, and David Crocker. Lastly, Andrew Brook's close critical reading and attention to detail can always be counted on and is appreciated.

NOTES

- ¹ Postcolonial feminist literature is growing rapidly. In this paper, I especially use insights from Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty (1997) and Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding (eds. 2000). From these collections, papers by Chandra Mohanty (1997), Lorraine Code (2000), Uma Narayan (2000), and Ann Ferguson (2000) have been particularly useful.
- ² Important feminist literature on the topic of women's paid work and its effects on women's status and roles in the private and public spheres includes: Beatrice Leigh Hutchins and Amy Harrison Spencer (1907), Jane Humphries (1977), Elizabeth Roberts (1984), Jane Lewis (1986), and Janet Sayers, Mary Evans, and Nanette Redclift (1987). In important research on the nonliberating aspects of paid work, S. Charusheela (forthcoming) argues that bargaining models tend to assume the perspective of privileged women and fail to consider work that has not been empowering for women of color, working-class women, ethnic minorities, or Third World women. I am indebted to Jane Humphries for alerting me to this research on paid work.
- ³ I am grateful to Bina Agarwal for pointing out that Sen mentions factors such as property ownership in passing and that his main emphasis has been on women's

- employment, which is the focus of this paper. See, however, Bina Agarwal (1994) on the significance of control over property in enhancing women's agency and well-being.
- ⁴ In a study of home-based work in domains such as fashion garments, nontraditional agricultural exports, and shea butter, Carr, Chen, and Tate argue that among the most disadvantaged of all workers in a global context are women who produce from their homes. They ask, "[w]hat greater contrast could there be—in terms of market knowledge, mobility, and competitiveness—than that between a large transnational company and a home-based woman producer?" (Marilyn Carr, Martha Chen, and Jane Tate 2000: 125).
 - ⁵ In the introduction to a special issue of *Feminist Economics* on globalization and gender, Benería, Floro, Grown, and MacDonald counter the argument that women's greater access to jobs generates gender equity with evidence that suggests that "gender inequality stimulated growth and that growth may exacerbate gender inequality" (Lourdes Benería, María Floro, Caren Grown and Martha MacDonald 2000: xi).
 - ⁶ The changing composition of the maquiladora workforce is substantiated by Verónica Vázquez García (per. com. 2002), who reports that men from rural areas of Mexico are being recruited. Kai Nielsen (per. com. 2002) has raised the point that lower labor costs in other regions are now resulting in the closing down of maquiladoras in Tijuana.
 - ⁷ SEWA, founded in India in 1972, has a membership of over 250,000 women and "has provided a range of services (financial, health, child care, and training) to its members." The work of SEWA is more important for the example it sets than for the number of women it reaches. More recently, SEWA has led an international movement of women workers and negotiated with international trade union federations and the International Labor Organization to recognize informal sector workers (Carr, Chen, and Tate 2000: 139).
 - ⁸ See, for example, Paul Seabright (2001).

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