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Public policy at work: A feminist critique of global economic development

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review of

Jain, D. and D. Elson (eds.) (2011) *Harvesting feminist knowledge for public policy: Rebuilding progress*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India. (HB, pp. 396, $55.00, ISBN 9788132107415)

Harvesting feminist knowledge for public policy addresses gender and socioeconomic inequalities spurred by the 2008-2009 economic downturn and exacerbated by increases in food prices as well as shortages, access to fuel, and financial failures of the state and banking industries. The book project is a product of the 2000 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as well as eleven years of discussion among feminist thinkers envisioning alternative futures with goals of social and economic justice. Forwarding a critique of market economies, *Harvesting feminist knowledge* challenges the concept that growth is the key to development while arguing for policies that promote a more socially-just economy. The collection offers a breadth of justice-oriented solutions beyond policy reform. Through the lens of feminist and economic development theories, the authors argue that current solutions to global economic crises encourage growth to the detriment of poor communities across the world, with the attendant physical, social and economic violence against the women who reside in them. Of particular interest to gender and organization studies scholars, the book emphasizes the problematic of informal and unpaid work, the role of the state in economic development, and the potential impact of women-led movements. Together, the authors outline an agenda of grassroots mobilization,

collective action, and a reimagining of alternatives for a more socially-just world. *Harvesting feminist knowledge* moves from discussions of policy reform to more radical questions of capital and gender as the authors envision future possibilities.

The discussion begins with a redefinition of the concept of work, challenging current economic policies and their treatment of informal work, in particular. Chapters by Jain, Benería, Collas-Monsod, Jhabvala, and Otobe address the lack of attention to women's informal work in public policy. Collas-Monsod, for example, pushes for the removal of the 'cloak of invisibility' by policy-makers with the inclusion of time-use data in GDP estimations, as well as the recognition of the impact that housework, family care and voluntary service work have on a nation's economy (93). Castañeda and Grammage's chapter, 'Gender, global crises and climate change', and Fall's chapter, 'The cost of the commoditization of food and water for women', extend the problem of work further by adding environmental crises into the equation. The physical and mental health of families and communities will continue to be stressed by consequences resulting from climate change, with increased pressure on the informal work that women contribute. The chapters by Castañeda and Grammage, and Falls, suggest policy solutions that privilege local knowledge and that value human rights to natural resources in the face of oncoming, environmental crises. Complicating the efforts to create more inclusive policy, however, is the necessity of the state's involvement in policy development, a critique of which is largely missing until the end of the text. The final chapters raise questions of power, ideology and masculinity, as well as the complexities of looking to the state as provider of rights, especially in a post-colonial, global economic climate that favors neoliberal policies. For example, policy-makers at the state level must recognize informal work through processes that require a transformed valuation of unpaid labour. As McFadden observes in her chapter on the challenges of feminist movements in Africa, 'our assumptions about the state...and our understandings of class and the practices that accompany privilege and power...urgently require closer and more radical scrutiny' (294). According to McFadden, women's movements must recognize the inequities produced by capitalism if they are to create real change.

The first two chapters of *Harvesting feminist knowledge* approach economic policy through reform, focusing on a human development approach and challenging neoliberal economic systems. Elson asserts that policy-makers must 'put social justice first' by focusing on human rights rather than economic markets. Especially in a post-crisis world, Elson's approach offers directions that privilege the human over profit and that invest in the cooperative efforts of communities, including those that involve unpaid labour most often contributed by women.

Socially-just economies, for Elson, recognize gender equality as a significant goal and require social investment in public goods and services, such as education and health. Seguino also focuses on policy reform in the chapter '"Rebooting" is not an option: Toward equitable social and economic development'. Seguino offers a vision for policy that challenges neoliberal goals of market deregulation and short-term economic growth and suggests strategies that promote long-term subsidies for small business and agricultural endeavors, regulation of central banks, and currency transaction tax (CTT) that can be used to generate social insurance if future crises arise. The state becomes especially important for Elson and for Seguino, both of whom look to government processes to seek reform rather than an upheaval of policy-producing systems.

Like Elson and Seguino, the authors in later chapters of *Harvesting feminist knowledge* recognize the role of market liberalization in rising social, political and economic inequality among women and men across the globe. Here, the book moves toward a provocative question: how might informal labour practices be counted in economic policy? These authors assert the necessity of recognizing the informal labour of women as significant in a nation's economic health. Jain turns to a case study of India in her discussion of hunger and economic success, emphasizing poverty as a gendered experience that men and women suffer differently. A nation's economic growth, Jain asserts, does not equal food security or nutrition for all; rather, 'the rich get hungrier' (Jain, 2011: 51; Sen, 2010). As corporate farms replace subsistence farms, women are impacted the most due to their role in supplying and preparing food for their families, often having to travel farther to find fuel and resources, such as water. Benería also observes the importance of informal labour, however, she provides evidence of a global move toward informalization of all labour through subcontracting, home-work production of goods and other precarious work. She notes in her chapter on 'Globalization, labor and women's work' that the largest proportion of informal work involves poor women in developing countries, who often leave their own families to care for the children of the wealthy and middle class in developed countries. Collas-Monsod's chapter, 'Removing the cloak of invisibility', recalls past efforts by the United Nations to calculate informal and unpaid work, as part of a country's national income. She highlights the case of the Philippines, in which gender-sensitive data were included in income measures. These data show that GDP in the Philippines increased by up to 40% from 1990-1998 with the inclusion of unpaid work. Collas-Monsod also cites findings from the Philippines case that women contribute approximately 71-73% of total unpaid hours when they are employed and up to 91% for women who are not involved in the formal, paid workforce (104). Jhabvala returns to India to address informal work in her chapter 'Poor women organizing for economic justice'. The author follows a powerful women's trade union in India, the Self-Employed Women's

Association, which organizes and studies the collective efforts of women workers. Jhabvala concludes that organizing informal workers is necessary, as is the inclusion of their voices in representative bodies at the regional, national and international levels. Otobe follows Jhabvala with a discussion of the International Labour Organization's decent work policy, which asserts that rights, productive employment, social protections and dialogue about labour and work are necessary for poverty reduction. Otobe takes a similar stance as the other authors in her call for women's unpaid work to be a part of any intervention into decent work policies.

Castañeda and Grammage extend the work of the previously mentioned authors with their focus on climate change as a factor that will impede unpaid work and also strike the most vulnerable, namely women, who predominantly participate in informal labour. Fall, too, speaks to the problem of commoditization of food and water services, which impacts women who, in the face of scarcity, are required to maintain care-taking responsibilities on less or travel farther in sometimes dangerous conditions in order to procure provisions for their families. United Nations climate change reports marginalize gender, according to Castañeda and Grammage. The authors recommend investment in policies that work toward gender equality. Women, for example, are often excluded from decision-making bodies or not considered to be stakeholders in resource management. Most important, Castañeda and Grammage suggest not only attention to gender relations, but also to differentiated gendered experiences, to the dangers of essentializing men and women based on biology, and to seeing local community members as actors rather than as passive respondents to change. Privileging local knowledge can inform policies that attend to resource scarcity and inform policy-makers of the impact that it, and other consequences such as malnutrition, disease and trauma, places on local communities.

The solutions offered by many of the authors suggest a common thread: that unpaid and informal work be included in economic policy. By employing the concept of bubbling up, as opposed to trickle down, authors challenge policy-makers to focus on women first and emphasize the importance of women organizing at the local, grassroots level in order to create broader economic change. Economic policy, the authors state time and again, must account for unpaid work. Jain's solution, for example, is to empower women to 'reclaim democracy and development' at the local level and then to build solidarity more broadly. For Benería, improving labour conditions is necessary for women's situation to improve, as is refining policies that currently export women's labour at the cost of fragmenting their own families for the sake of capital. Collas-Monsod points to the UN's System of National Accounts (SNA), which continues to exclude unpaid activities as part of a nation's income. Adding to the support

for women's movements, Silliman, in the last chapter, calls for women's groups to embrace progressive masculinities and to challenge the gender binary that divides women's and men's groups as both strive for equality. While the authors support the inclusion of unpaid work in policy, few question the cultural and political structures that will push back on these efforts. Collas-Monsod, for example, states that the SNA relented in their efforts to count unpaid work in national statistics due to a 'lack of demand' on the part of nations' policy-makers and the desire to uphold the status quo that keeps women's unpaid work invisible and exploitable. Without further critique of the state, in their present, neoliberal form, the arguments made for policy change will be difficult to achieve.

Throughout the discussions of unpaid work, arguments suggesting that public policy is the key to women's advancement are constrained because these policies must be recognized by power that rests with the state and the ideologies of those who continue to operate it. The State, and the corporate interests embedded in it, remains unexplained in *Harvesting feminist knowledge*. What is the State's role in change? How might change be hindered at local, national and international levels if policy-makers refuse to recognize unpaid work or women's well-being as significant to broader economic policies? For example, while Jhabvala recognizes the significance of organizing poor women toward economic justice, she admits that 'scaling up' is necessary for broader impact and also that efforts rely on both State and transitory corporate interests in order to succeed. Small groups lose power as larger organizational bodies usurp them. The State's cooperation, then, is necessary in maintaining women's voices beyond grassroots organizing. Climate change policies, too, are dependent on wider national efforts of developed countries to regulate emissions. While the authors offer productive solutions, the problem of the paternalism, patriarchy and neoliberal policies maintained at the state level continues to plague promising outcomes.

Wendy Brown, in her book *States of injury: Power and freedom in late modernity* (1995), may provide a productive approach to a public policy-based critique of the State. Brown asserts that the State has replaced the man in women's lives, offering welfare and care in place of husbands and fathers. Further, Brown (1995: 11) recognizes the role of neoliberal policies, stating that in the 1970s, 'as the Right promulgated an increasingly narrow and predominantly economic formulation of freedom and claimed freedom's ground as its own, liberals and leftists lined up behind an equally narrow and predominantly economic formulation of equality'. Groups who are interested in progressive social change, therefore, must question the State's role as provider of rights and critique the 'wounds' that political groups maintain as sites of identity in their struggle to gain rights and recognition by the State. While arguments within *Harvesting*

feminist knowledge envision a more socially-just future, they run up against political bodies that reaffirm women's identities as wounded and in need of the State to rectify past wrongs. Brown, on the other hand, suggests a 'postindividualist' conceptualization of freedom that moves from identities garnered from injuries of the past ('who I am') toward forward-looking, collective futures ('what I want for us') (51). Through a critical perspective of the political and the State, policy becomes less of a striving to possess rights that are kept out of the hands of women and more of a demand to redefine work and the value that the State places on the informal work of women.

There are moments in *Harvesting feminist knowledge* that open up a critique of the State and that strengthen the discussion of informal and unpaid work. Seguino, for example, claims that the focus of policy should be on the social rather than on the state, which she contends is controlled by exclusive groups of officials (15). Fall, too, offers examples from Tanzania, Bolivia and Ghana, in which communities' grassroots efforts successfully challenged State efforts to privatize water systems to the detriment of their people. Further, McFadden's chapter on African feminism offers a particularly strong critique of capitalism and power, stating that women in Africa have been homogenized as '"breeders" for colonial capitalism...kept outside any direct relationship with the state and/or public institutions' (297). Citing the case of Zimbabwe, McFadden recognizes that women's organizations have been recognized only if they are able to operationalize the neocolonial policies of the state. These organizations have been absorbed through discourses that maintain Africa as dependent on the West, particularly through women's NGOs, which can problematically reify neoliberal structures. McFadden suggests that a period of introspection is necessary for feminists. She also asserts that feminists should trace the conjunctures in which radical changes occurred for women, in order to retrieve feminist history for the present (302). McFadden's directions align with Brown's assertions: that a challenge to the contemporary, neoliberal State must involve a critical perspective, and introspection, that recognizes the co-productive processes of power and capital through which policy is determined.

In conclusion, *Harvesting feminist knowledge* provocatively challenges policy-makers to question conceptions of work and opens possibilities for public policy through redefinition. Scholars and practitioners of public policy, development studies, organization studies, and gender studies will find encouragement in the suggestions made by the contributors to this book. Public policy is one means through which social change can, indeed, 'bubble up'. As reiterated by the authors, however, women's labour all too often is unpaid and made invisible. *Harvesting feminist knowledge* offers a detailed critique of specific policies that, if maintained, will continue to marginalize women, at best. At worst, these policies,

when left uncritiqued, produce outcomes that endanger the physical and mental well-being of women and the global communities in which they reside.

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