

Women, identity and activism in Asian and Pacific community economies

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Abstract:

This paper argues that as an antidote to capitalist globalization it is necessary to identify the full range of economic identities that people occupy and the multiple directions that local economic transformation might take. I suggest that an economic politics of place can build upon the distinctiveness of the diverse economies that inhabit specific economic landscapes. Using the lens of a diverse economy I elaborate what community economy activism might be and introduce three stories of women's role in building and strengthening non-capitalist community economies in place.

Key words:

Economic diversity; non-capitalist community economies; women's economic activism

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Katherine Gibson

The dominant discourse of globalization has, over the last few decades, encouraged blind faith in promises that deregulation of financial markets, macro- and micro-economic reforms and abolition of barriers to capital and labour mobility will produce (or restore) the efficient functioning of the world economy and bring economic benefit to all. This confidence in the possibility of control, order and certainty within the global economic system has a familiar modernist, and certainly masculinist, ring (Amariglio and Ruccio, 1994, Gibson-Graham, 1996). But alongside these buoyant beliefs in the efficiency and benefits of globalization a haunting uncertainty has arisen surrounding the identity of *who* the local agent of development in the age of globalization might be. Somewhat paradoxically we have seen heightened interest by development agencies in the central role women, particularly those in poor places, can play in projects of ‘economic development’.

Increasingly, it seems, it is the figure of woman that has emerged in ‘third world countries’ as the new subjects of development, the “desired beneficiaries and agents of progress” (Rankin, 2001:19). While near invisible within global and national scale debates about leveling the playing field and joining the global economy, at the local level women in poor urban and rural areas have become the targets of market-led approaches to local development. Women have been recruited into micro-credit schemes and micro-enterprise development projects upon which the hopes for poverty reduction and

economic growth are pinned.ⁱ And in new debates that trace the success of development agendas to the ‘social capital’ of certain communities, women’s work in nurturing social ties and building and maintaining aspects of civil society is undeniable.ⁱⁱ Finally, it seems, the contribution of women to the functioning of economic systems is being seriously taken into account.ⁱⁱⁱ Whether men have failed some sort of test or not, is unclear. What is apparent is that women as economic agents have become a major focus for development interventions.^{iv}

What might this paradoxical focus upon women in poor places as the new hope for ‘development’ in the ‘age of globalization’ mean? What possibilities might this paradox enable and what potentialities does it foreclose? In this short paper I ask which of the many economic identities that women occupy are being recognized and fostered by these interventions? And what forms of economic activism are being supported? My critical exploration of these questions is informed by a political interest in re-presenting the diversity of economic identities and relations that constitute the economic landscape. For Julie Graham and myself this interest in elaborating a vision of the ‘diverse economy’ is one of our strategic moves against the subordination of local subjects to the discourse of (capitalist economic) globalization (see Graham, this issue and Gibson-Graham, 2001a and b). By situating these recent gender-focused development interventions within a conception of the diverse economy I aim to highlight their narrow complicity with capitalocentric visions of development. The three very specific stories of women in place (by Lau Kin Chi, May-an Villalba and Gina Koczberski) that follow this introductory essay all offer alternatives and antidotes to this singular model of economic activism.

And the diverse economy frame that I use to introduce these stories helps to envision them as powerful constituents of an enlivened non-capitalist economic politics of place.

The ‘place’ of women in mainstream market-led economic development strategies

It was the pioneering achievements of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh that encouraged international development agencies to shift their economic focus to women. Direct improvements to poor community’s livelihoods could be achieved, it seemed, by facilitating women’s access to small amounts of credit that they could use to support home and community-based micro-enterprises. With the new micro-credit and micro-enterprise focus, neo-liberal market-led internationalist orthodoxies were married with longstanding local community traditions of revolving credit networks and women’s involvement in informal sector production and trading. The ongoing success of these micro-finance schemes relies upon the self-regulating power of the women’s borrower group to provide collective and corrective surveillance of individual women’s economic habits (Rankin, 2001). As more of these schemes have been monitored there is growing concern that some of their impacts may have undermined the trust and supportive networks (the social capital) that enabled them to be established in the first place.^v

Rather than attempting to adjudicate the relative success or failure of these schemes, I am interested in exploring the discursive placement of women in economic space that these interventions achieve. Clearly it is women’s economic identity as existing or potential entrepreneurs that is called forth by these policies. And, as Rankin (2001) argues, it is to women as rational economic subjects, for whom individual gain is paramount, that the

appeal for involvement in the schemes is made. Both these aspects of identity are linked to a vision of the *economy* as essentially **capitalist**, the *feminine subject* as desirous of **becoming a capitalist** and *place* as incorporated or incorporable into **capitalist space**. This is a vision that denies the diversity of women's economic commitments and involvements and ignores the multiplicity of economies and subjects that coexist in economically distinctive places. Importantly, it is a view that disregards the many different opportunities and directions for local economic transformation.

Envisioning the diverse economy

As part of our deconstructive project of countering capitalist globalization we have been engaged in unhinging economic thinking from capitalocentric discourse. Such discourse locates all economic difference within a field in which the capitalist market, wage labour and capitalist production are established as the norm and different, non-capitalist, economic relations or entities are seen as the same as, complements to, opposites of or contained within capitalism. As a preliminary step we have convened the many strands of economic analysis that have not taken capitalism as the sole subject of inquiry (Gibson-Graham, 2001b). This includes the work of feminist economists who have problematized the household and voluntary sectors, informal sector theorists of both the 'third' and 'first' worlds, economic anthropologists who have focused upon indigenous kin-based and 'gift' economies, economic sociologists who have problematized the cultural and social embeddedness of economies and marxist political economists who have pursued a surplus oriented economic analysis, amongst others. With this immense body of work in mind, one way of conceptualizing the diversity of economic relations is in terms of the

coexistence of different kinds of transaction, ways of performing labour and modes of economic organization. Our current representation of what we have called the diverse economy is shown in Figure 1. You will note that what is often seen as ‘**the economy**’, that is capitalist markets, wage labour and capitalist enterprise, is merely one set of cells in a vast and complex matrix of diverse economic relations that sustain livelihoods in communities around the world.

Figure 1 (at end of manuscript)

While it is difficult to represent dynamics on a static matrix that best shows different identities, we would like to emphasize that there are no pre-given assumptions of determination implied by this Figure. If indeed any could be read into this graphic representation, we would encourage a recognition that capitalist economic relations can be seen to rest upon, or be supported by, a sea of non-capitalist economic relations—an inversion of the old base-superstructure view that situated capitalist production at the basis of all that constituted society at large. What we place below the cells associated with capitalism is what we have come to call the ‘community economy’.^{vi} It is in the community economy that we see women and place-based economic activism as having an important impact.

In the community economy ‘economic’ transactions are inflected with ethical principles (often loosely defined but strongly adhered to) that acknowledge the relational interdependence of all activities that constitute a society. These principles uphold a range

of social values to do with family, community and environmental sustainability. It is these values that define how a community might understand and practice commensurability in the context of material and symbolic transactions; or how labour is acceptably performed, accounted for and remunerated; or how the surplus generated by certain activities is rightfully appropriated and distributed. In a community economy the material wellbeing of people and the sustainability of the community are priority objectives.

Returning for a moment to view the recent gender-focused interventions by international development agencies within a diverse economy frame, we can see that these schemes seek to strengthen or establish women as self-employed workers in small enterprises that are modeled upon capitalist enterprise. The 'development dream' is that, through good fiscal management and innovative product development, some of these micro-enterprises will become fully-fledged capitalist enterprises and the economic benefits will then flow to the wider society.

In contrast, the project of building and strengthening community economies assumes that a trickle down or out of economic benefit cannot be left to chance. It involves close monitoring of the ethical components of economic interactions and the devising and experimenting with mechanisms for ensuring the widest distribution of benefit to all community members. Importantly, this includes the development or maintenance of subjectivities that support some form of modified and socially acceptable communalism over and above rampant competitive individualism. In the three essays that follow we

hear of women's economic activism that is promoting, strengthening or creating distinctive place-based community economies. While each could be seen as small and insignificant interventions in the face of capitalist globalization, seen through the lens of a diverse economy these projects are exciting and significant attempts to develop the unique specificity of non-capitalist places.

The 'place' of women in community economic activism

Roy Morrison's book length account of the Mondragon cooperatives of the Basque region of Spain has the title We Build the Road as We Travel. As the Mondragon cooperators found, there was no pre-given pathway to follow when they sought to develop a new, socially equitable and culturally distinctive regional economy. This epigram reminds us that when building a community economy there are no economic models that can be pulled down from the shelf and set in place. What we have, are continual debates over economic and ethical considerations at every step of the way. Out of these debates and the choices that are made are built culturally specific and uniquely place-based economies.

In Lau Kin Chi's essay we see a community in the throes of building their road as they travel. Here, in the context of disenchantment with many of the old promises and dictates of communism and suspicion of the new promises and dictates of capitalism, women in a remote rural community of Jiangxi Province have established the first all women mutual-support credit union in China. They are engaged in collective production for the market of lily bulbs, a traditional health food, as well as the provision of a variety of social

services to the local community. With recent memory of the draconian operation of communist collectivization of the countryside, the women of Baishui Township are carefully considering how to account for voluntary labour inputs, how to set fair wages for agricultural labour and other work, how to allow for individual benefits to be accessed within a 'collective' project and how to distribute the credit union's surplus so as to sustain the community economy. The ideological pull of mainstream economic discourse—talk of the greater 'efficiency' of individualism and private entrepreneurialism—is strong. And yet, with the assistance of the Jiangxi Women's Federation and the China Social Services and Development Research Centre, a voluntary group located in the heart of capitalist Hong Kong, the project is doggedly pursuing a community economy agenda. They are using their economic surplus to reach out to women in the wider region, providing health checks and cultural enrichment programs. And at the village level the project is looking into diversifying its economic activities, with acquisition of land to experiment with more organic agricultural products.

May-an Villalba recounts the story of a Filipina migrant worker who left her home in Iloilo to become a domestic servant in Hong Kong. Like millions of her fellow Filipinos, this woman sought employment overseas as a contract worker to support her family at home. But unlike the majority of Filipino migrants she became involved with the outreach of the Asian Migrant Centre in Hong Kong and joined a savings group along with other women from her home town. She recounts the tale of their experiments with investing in Iloilo under the guidance of Unlad Kabayan, a Manila based NGO that is committed to the active reintegration of migrant workers back into their national

economy and society. Unlad Kabayan's charter is increasingly becoming focused upon strengthening and developing community economies in the places from which migrants are drawn. They have an impressive record of supporting overseas migrant savings groups to invest in productive and socially useful enterprises in villages across the Philippines. The story that May-an Villalba recounts is full of the challenges and dilemmas of an individual who is reshaping her economic subjectivity, dis-identifying with the subject position of feudal serf or domestic servant and re-identifying with the possibility of a role as manager or cooperator in a community enterprise. Again, the pathway is untrodden and the unfolding story is one that calls for support.

Gina Koczberski's story of the Mama Lus Frut Scheme in Papua New Guinea offers yet a different perspective on strengthening community economies. She tells of an initiative introduced by a capitalist corporation to increase oil palm productivity that has had unprecedented success in drawing women into the production of this export crop. It would be easy to see this tale as evidence of increased penetration by capitalist market relations within PNG society and thus the superior power of globalization. Koczberski suggests, however, that the women involved in harvesting loose oil palm fruitlets for the capitalist corporation are simultaneously strengthening the viability of the indigenous economy. Despite the displacement from their home villages of many of the settlers on the oil palm schemes, the indigenous, village-based economy remains surprisingly robust. The direct cash remuneration for women's labour offered by the company allows women a new form of economic power that they are putting to direct community and family benefit. For example, in addition to buying food and household goods for their immediate

families, women's cash is directed into traditional gift exchanges that sustain clan identity, maintain rights to land and culture and celebrate community events. By occasionally allocating loose fruit collection work and payment to relations or neighbours, women are extending their connections to others and taking a role in adjudicating and diffusing family and community conflict. All these activities help to sustain a complex social network whose ethical dimensions are based in custom. But in that this new income is based upon a principle of gender equity (compensation for the work of women *as well as* men), participation in the scheme is also gently introducing other ethical considerations into the social frame. That women are using their new-found power to enhance the livelihoods **of all** is a form of insurance that this non-traditional value might not be rejected by the community at large.

All these stories richly attest to the distinctiveness of place as a site of economic diversity, not a colonized point in a capitalist world. They show women as activists consciously and unconsciously building and strengthening community economies. And they illustrate the vitality of a non-capitalist politics of place that is focused directly upon livelihood support and economic wellbeing.

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Figure 1
A Diverse Economy

<i>Transactions</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Organizational Form</i>
MARKET	WAGE	CAPITALIST
<i>ALTERNATIVE MARKET</i> <i>Local trading systems</i> <i>Alternative currencies</i> <i>Black market</i> <i>Co-op exchange</i>	<i>ALTERNATIVE PAID</i> <i>Cooperative</i> <i>Self-employed</i> <i>Indentured</i> <i>In kind</i>	<i>ALTERNATIVE CAPITALIST</i> <i>Environmental ethic</i> <i>Social ethic</i>
<i>NON-MARKET</i> <i>Barter</i> <i>Household flows</i> <i>Gifts</i> <i>Indigenous exchange</i>	<i>UNPAID</i> <i>Volunteer</i> <i>Housework</i> <i>Family care</i>	<i>NON- CAPITALIST</i> <i>Communal</i> <i>Self-employed</i> <i>Feudal</i> <i>Slave</i>

The shaded area represents activities in the ‘community economy’.

ⁱ This visibility within one policy gaze of poor women 'emplaced' in marginal localities is, however, in stark contrast to the relative invisibility within any policy spectrum of the vast numbers of 'displaced' women who have migrated to designated economic development zones for lowly paid work in global factories or to global cities for work as domestic servants in middle income households. In these economic roles women are not heralded as agents of progress in quite the same way (though see Gibson, Law and McKay, 2001 for a discussion of the way in which contract migrant workers are portrayed as 'national heroes' by the Philippines state).

ⁱⁱ See Woolcock, 1998 for a comprehensive overview of the social capital literature, and Fine, 1999 for a critical take on its new-found status within development circles.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thanks in large part to the work of feminist economists such as Marilyn Waring, Lourdes Benaria and Nancy Folbre who have championed the 'counting' of women's contribution to national economies.

^{iv} The quest for a specific 'agent' of development has characterized many different phases of intervention by colonial authorities and development agencies in the 'Third World'. In some cases one ethnic or racial group has been singled out as the leaders of development, in others those engaged in particular sectors of economic activity have been targeted. Now it seems gender is offering another way to separate out the leaders from the laggards in the development race.

^v Writes Katharine Rankin "Ethnographic studies have shown that in some microcredit programmes group members vigorously monitor one another's consumption patterns to ensure cash reserves are devoted foremost to loan repayment. In practice, the groups can thus generate an environment of hostility and coercion that polarizes, rather than unites, their members." (2001:32)

^{vi} With the exception, I hasten to add, of such undesirable and unfortunately still prevalent practices such as slavery and indentured labour.