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GENDER INEQUALITY AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

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THEORIES OF JUSTICE are undergoing something of an identity crisis. How can they be universal, principled, founded on good reasons that all can accept, and yet take account of the many differences there are among persons and social groups? Feminists have been among the first to point out that large numbers of persons have typically been excluded from consideration in purportedly universalist theories. And some feminists have gone on to point out that many feminist theories, while taking account of sexist bias or omission, have neglected racist, heterosexist, class, religious, and other biases. Yet, joining our voices with those of others, some of us discern problems with going in the direction of formulating a theory of justice entirely by listening to every concrete individual's or group's point of view and expression of its needs. Is it possible, by taking this route, to come up with any principles at all? Is it a reliable route, given the possibility of "false consciousness"? Doesn't stressing differences, especially cultural differences, lead to a slide toward relativism? The problem that is being grappled with is an important one. There can no longer be any doubt that many voices have not been heard when most theories of justice were being shaped. But how can all the different voices express themselves and be heard and still yield a coherent and workable theory of justice? This question is one I shall (eventually) return to in this essay.

FEMINISM, DIFFERENCE, AND ESSENTIALISM

Feminists have recently had much to say about difference. One aspect of the debate has been a continuation of an old argument—about how different

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women are from men, what such differences may be due to, and whether they require that laws and other aspects of public policy should treat women any differently from men.¹ Another, newer, aspect of the debate is about differences among women. It is "essentialist," some say, to talk about women, the problems of women, and especially the problems of women "as such."² White middle- and upper-class feminists, it is alleged, have excluded or been insensitive to not only the problems of women of other races, cultures, and religions but even those of women of other classes than their own. "Gender" is therefore a problematic category, those opposed to such essentialism say, unless always qualified by and seen in the context of race, class, ethnicity, religion, and other such differences (Childers and hooks 1990; Harris 1990; hooks 1984; Lorde 1984; Minow and Spelman 1990; Spelman 1988).

The general allegation of feminist essentialism certainly has validity when applied to some work. Feminists with such pedigrees as Harriet Taylor, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, and Betty Friedan (in *The Feminine Mystique*) all seem to have assumed, for example, that the women they were liberating would have recourse to servants. With the partial exception of Woolf, who remarks briefly on the difficult lot of maids, they did not pay attention to the servants, the vast majority of whom were also, of course, women. The tendency of many white middle- and upper-class feminists in the mid-nineteenth century to think only of women of their own class and race (some were explicitly racist) is what makes so poignant and compelling Sojourner Truth's words in her famous "Ain't I a woman?" speech.³ However, I think, and will argue, that this problem is far less present in the works of most recent feminists. But the charges of "essentialism" seem to grow ever louder. They are summed up in Elizabeth Spelman's (1988) recent claim that "the focus on women 'as women' has addressed only one group of women—namely, white middle-class women of Western industrialized countries" (p. 4). This has come to be accepted in some circles as virtually a truism.

The claim that much recent feminist theory is essentialist comes primarily from three (to some extent, overlapping) sources—European-influenced postmodernist thought; the work of African-American and other minority feminist women in the United States and Britain; and, in particular, Spelman's recent book, *Inessential Woman* (hereafter *IW*). Postmodernism is skeptical of all universal or generalizable claims, including those of feminism. It finds concepts central to feminist thinking, such as "gender" and "woman," as illegitimate as any other category or generalization that does not stop to take account of every difference. As Julia Kristeva, for example, says,

The belief that “one is a woman” is almost as absurd and obscurantist as the belief that “one is a man” [W]e must use “we are women” as an advertisement or slogan for our demands. On a deeper level, however, a woman cannot “be”; it is something which does not even belong in the order of *being*. (Quoted in Marks and de Courtivron 1981, 137)

In the same interview, she also says that, because of the very different history of Chinese women, “it is absurd to question their lack of ‘sexual liberation’” (in Marks and de Courtivron 1981, 140). Clearly, she thinks we could have no cross-cultural explanations of or objections to gender inequality.

Spelman argues that “the phrase ‘as a woman’ is the Trojan horse of feminist ethnocentrism” (*IW*, 13). The great mistakes of white middle-class feminists have been to exclude women different from themselves from their critiques or, even when they are included, to assume that, whatever their differences, their experience of sexism is the same. At best, she says, what is presented is “[a]n additive analysis [which] treats the oppression of a black woman in a society that is racist as well as sexist as if it were a further burden when in fact it is a *different burden*” (*IW*, 123; emphasis added).

These antiessentialist arguments, however, are often long on theory and very short on empirical evidence. A large proportion of Spelman’s examples of how women’s experiences of oppression are different are taken from periods of slavery in ancient Greece and, especially, in the pre-Civil War South. It is not clear, though, how relevant is the obvious contrast between the experience of white slaveholders’ wives and black female slaves to most issues involving the sameness or difference of forms of gender oppression today.

Apart from the paucity of relevant evidence (which I shall return to), there seem to me to be two other related problems with Spelman’s general antiessentialist argument. One is the claim that unless a feminist theorist perceives gender identity as intrinsically bound up with class, race, or other aspects of identity she ignores the effects of these other differences altogether. Spelman writes, “If gender were isolatable from other forms of identity, if sexism were isolatable from other forms of oppression, then what would be true about the relation between any man and any woman would be true about the relation between any other man and any other woman” (*IW*, 81). But this does not follow at all. One can argue that sexism is an identifiable form of oppression, many of whose effects are felt by women regardless of race or class, without at all subscribing to the view that race and class oppression are insignificant. One can still insist, for example, on the significant difference between the relation of a poor black woman to a wealthy white man and that of a wealthy white woman to a poor black man.

The second problem is that Spelman misplaces the burden of proof, which presumably affects her perception of the need for her to produce evidence

for her claims. She says, "Precisely insofar as a discussion of gender and gender relations is really, even if obscurely, about a particular group of women and their relation to a particular group of men, it is unlikely to be applicable to any other group of women" (*IW*, 114). But why? Surely the burden of proof is on the critic. To be convincing, she needs to show that and how the theory accused of essentialism omits or distorts the experience of persons other than those few the theorist allegedly does take account of. This, after all, is the burden that many of the feminists Spelman considers "essentialist" have themselves taken on in critiquing "malestream" theories. One of the problems of antiessentialist feminism (shared, I think, with much of postmodernist critique) is that it tends to substitute the cry "We're all different" for both argument and evidence.

There are, however, exceptions, and they tend to come from feminists who belong to racial minorities. One of the best critiques of feminist essentialism that I know of is that by Angela Harris (1990), in which she shows how ignorance of the specifics of a culture mars even thoroughly well-intentioned feminist analyses of women's experiences of oppression within that culture. She argues, for example, that in some respects, black women in the United States have had a qualitatively rather than simply quantitatively different experience of rape than that of white women (see esp. 594, 598-601). Even here, though, I think the antiessentialist critique is only partly convincing. Although more concerned with evidence for the salience of differences than most antiessentialists seem to be, Harris raises far more empirical questions than she provides answers. She provides just one example to support her assertion that black women's experience of rape is, even now, radically different from that of white women—that it is "an experience as deeply rooted in color as in gender" (p. 598).⁴ Yet she, like Spelman, is as much disturbed by white feminists' saying that black women are "just like us only more so" as she is by their marginalizing black women or ignoring them altogether. As I shall argue, this "insult[ing]" conclusion—that the problems of other women are "similar to ours but more so"—is exactly the one I reach when I apply some Western feminist ideas about justice to the situations of poor women in many poor countries.

In this essay, I put antiessentialist feminism to what I think is a reasonably tough test. In doing this, I am taking up the gauntlet that Spelman throws down. She says, referring to the body of new work about women that has appeared in many fields,

Rather than assuming that women have something in common as women, these researchers should help us look to see whether they do. Rather than first finding out what is

true of some women as women and then inferring that this is true of all women . . . , we have to investigate different women's lives and see what they have in common. (JW, 137)

Trained as a philosopher, she does not seem to consider it appropriate to take up the challenge of actually looking at some of this empirical evidence. Having said the above, she turns back to discussing Plato. Trained as a political scientist, I shall attempt to look at some comparative evidence. I'll put some Western feminist ideas about justice and inequality to the test (drawing on my recent book and the many feminist sources I use to support some of its arguments) by seeing how well these theories—developed in the context of women in well-off Western industrialized countries—work when used to look at the very different situations of some of the poorest women in poor countries. How do our accounts and our explanations of gender inequality stand up in the face of considerable cultural and socioeconomic difference?

DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES IN GENDER OPPRESSION: POOR WOMEN IN POOR COUNTRIES

Does the assumption “that there is a generalizable, identifiable and collectively shared experience of womanhood” (Benhabib and Cornell 1987, 13) *have* any validity, or is it indeed an essentialist myth, rightly challenged by Third World women and their spokesfeminists? Do the theories devised by First World feminists, particularly our critiques of nonfeminist theories of justice, have anything to say, in particular, to the poorest women in poor countries, or to those policymakers with the potential to affect their lives for better or for worse?

In trying to answer these questions, I shall address, in turn, four sets of issues, which have been addressed both by recent feminist critics of Anglo-American social and political theory and by those development scholars who have in recent years concerned themselves with the neglect or distortion of the situation of women in the countries they study. First, why and how has the issue of the inequality between the sexes been ignored or obscured for so long and addressed only so recently? Second, why is it so important that it be addressed? Third, what do we find, when we subject households or families to standards of justice—when we look at the largely hidden inequalities between the sexes? And finally, what are the policy implications of these findings?

Why Attention to Gender Is Comparatively New

In both development studies and theories of justice, there has, until recently, been a marked lack of attention to gender—and in particular to systematic inequalities between the sexes. This point has been made about theories of justice throughout the 1980s (e.g., Kearns 1983; Okin 1989b; Crossthwaite 1989). In the development literature, it was first made earlier, in pioneering work by Ester Boserup, but has lately been heard loud and strong from a number of other prominent development theorists (Chen 1983; Dasgupta 1993; Sen 1990a, 1990b; Jelin 1990). In both contexts, the neglect of women and gender seems to be due primarily to two factors. The first is the assumption that the household (usually assumed to be male-headed) is the appropriate unit of analysis. The dichotomy between the public (political and economic) and the private (domestic and personal) is assumed valid, and only the former has been taken to be the appropriate sphere for development studies and theories of justice, respectively, to attend to. In ethical and political theories, the family is often regarded as an inappropriate context for justice, since love, altruism, or shared interests are assumed to hold sway within it. Alternatively, it is sometimes taken for granted that it is a realm of hierarchy and injustice. (Occasional theorists, like Rousseau, have said both!) In economics, development and other, households until recently have simply been taken for granted as the appropriate unit of analysis on such questions as income distribution. The public/private dichotomy and the assumption of the male-headed household have many serious implications for women as well as for children that are discussed below (Dasgupta 1993; Jaquette 1982, 283; Okin 1989b, 10-14, 124-33; Olsen 1983; Pateman 1983).

The second factor is the closely related failure to disaggregate data or arguments by sex. In the development literature, it seems to appear simply in this form (Chen, Huq, and D'Souza 1981, 68; Jaquette 1982, 283-84). In the justice literature, this used to be obscured by the use of male pronouns and other referents. Of late, the (rather more insidious) practice that I have called "false gender neutrality" has appeared. This consists in the use of gender-neutral terms ("he or she," "persons," and so on), when the point being made is simply invalid or otherwise false if one actually applies it to women (Okin 1989b, esp. 10-13, 45). But the effect is the same in both literatures; women are not taken into account, so the inequalities between the sexes are obscured.

The public/domestic dichotomy has serious implications for women. It not only obscures intrahousehold inequalities of resources and power, as I discuss below, but it also results in the failure to count a great deal of the work done by women as work, since all that is considered "work" is what is

done for pay in the “public” sphere. All of the work that women do in bearing and rearing children, cleaning and maintaining households, caring for the old and sick, and contributing in various ways to men’s work does not count as work. This is clearly one of those instances in which the situation of poor women in poor countries is not qualitatively *different* from that of most women in rich countries but, rather, “similar but worse,” for even more, in some cases far more, of the work done by women (and children) in poor countries is rendered invisible, not counted, or “subsumed under men’s work.” The work of subsistence farming, tending to animals, domestic crafts (if not for the market), and the often arduous fetching of water and fuel are all added to the category of unrecognized work of women that already exists in richer countries.⁵ Chen notes that women who do all these things “are listed [by policymakers] as housewives,” even though “their tasks are as critical to the wellbeing of their families and to national production as are the men’s” (Chen 1983, 220; see also Dasgupta 1993; Drèze and Sen 1989, chap. 4; Jaquette 1982, citing Bourgue and Warren 1979; Waring 1989).

Why Does It Matter?

This may seem like a silly question. Indeed, I hope it will soon be unnecessary, but it isn’t—yet. I therefore argue, at the outset of *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, that the omission from theories of justice of gender, and of much of women’s lives, is significant for three major reasons. Each of these reasons applies at least as much to the neglect of gender in theories of development. The first is obvious: women matter (at least they do to feminists), and their well-being matters at least as much as that of men. As scholars of development have recently been making clear, the inequalities between the sexes in a number of poor countries have not only highly detrimental but *fatal* consequences for millions of women. Sen (1990a) has recently argued that as many as one hundred million fewer women exist than might normally be expected on the basis of male/female mortality rates in societies less devaluing of women—not only the Western industrialized world but much of sub-Saharan Africa, too (see also Dasgupta 1993; Drèze and Sen 1989, chap. 4; Drèze and Sen 1990, Introduction, 11-14; but cf. Harriss 1990; Wheeler and Abdullah 1988). So here too we can reasonably say that the issue of the neglect of women is “similar but *much* worse.”

The second reason I have raised (in the U.S. context) for the necessity for feminist critique of theories of social justice is that equality of opportunity—for women and girls—but also for increasing numbers of boys—is much affected by the failure of theories of justice to address gender inequality. This

is in part due to the greater extent of economic distress in female-headed households. In the United States, nearly 25 percent of children are being raised in single female-headed households, and three-fifths of all chronically poor households with children are among those supported by single women. It has been recently estimated that throughout the world one-third of households are headed by single females, with the percentage much higher in regions with significant male out-migration (Chen 1983, 221, Jaquette 1982, 271). Many millions of children are affected by the higher rate of poverty among such families.⁶ Theories of justice or of economic development that fail to pay attention to gender ignore this, too.

In addition, the gendered division of labor has a serious and direct impact on the opportunities of girls and women, which crosses the lines of economic class. The opportunities of females are significantly affected by the structures and practices of family life, particularly by the fact that women are almost invariably primary caretakers, which has much impact on their availability for full-time wage work. It also results in their frequently being *overworked*, and renders them less likely than men to be considered economically valuable. This factor, too, operates "similarly but more so" within poor families in many poor countries. There, too, adult women suffer—often more severely—many of the same effects of the division of labor as do women in richer countries. But, in addition, their daughters are likely to be put to work for the household at a very young age, are much less likely to be educated and to attain literacy than are sons of the same households and, worst of all—less valued than their brothers—they have less chance of staying alive because they are more likely to be deprived of food or of health care (Dasgupta 1993; Drèze and Sen 1990, chap. 4; Sen 1990a; Papanek 1990).

Third, I have argued that the failure to address the issue of just distribution within households is significant because the family is the first, and arguably the most influential, school of moral development (Okın 1989b, esp. 17-23). It is the first environment in which we experience how persons treat each other, in which we have the potential to learn how to be just or unjust. If children see that sex difference is the occasion for obviously differential treatment, they are surely likely to be affected in their personal and moral development. They are likely to learn injustice by absorbing the messages, if male, that they have some kind of "natural" enhanced entitlement and, if female, that they are *not* equals and had better get used to being subordinated if not actually abused. So far as I know, this point was first made in the Western context by John Stuart Mill, who wrote of the "perverting influence" of the typical English family of his time—which he termed "a school of despotism" (Mill [1869] 1988, 88). I have argued that the still remaining unequal distribution of benefits and burdens between most parents in two-

parent heterosexual families is likely to affect their children's developing sense of justice (Okin 1989b, e.g., 21-23, 97-101). In the context of poor countries, as Papanek (1990) notes, "Domestic groups in which age and gender difference confer power on some over others are poor environments in which to unlearn the norms of inequality" (pp. 163-65). She also notes that "given the persistence of gender-based inequalities in power, authority, and access to resources, one must conclude that socialization for gender inequality is by and large very successful" (p. 170). When such basic goods as food and health care are unequally distributed to young children according to sex, a very strong signal about the acceptability of injustice is surely conferred. The comparison of most families in rich countries with poor families in poor countries—where distinctions between the sexes often start earlier and are much more blatant and more harmful to girls—yields, here too, the conclusion that, in the latter case, things are not so much different as "similar but more so." Many Third World families, it seems, are even worse schools of justice and more successful inculcators of the inequality of the sexes as natural and appropriate than are their developed world equivalents. Thus there is even more need for attention to be paid to gender inequality in the former context than in the latter.

Justice in the Family

What do we find when we compare some of Anglo-American feminists' findings about justice within households in their societies with recent discoveries about distributions of benefits and burdens in poor households in poor countries? Again, in many respects, the injustices of gender are quite similar.

In both situations, women's access to paid work is constrained both by discrimination and sex segregation in the workplace and by the assumption that women are "naturally" responsible for all or most of the unpaid work of the household (Bergmann 1986; Fuchs 1988; Gerson 1985; Okin 1989b, 147-52, 155-56; Sanday 1974). In both situations, women typically work longer total hours than men:

Time-use statistics considering all work (paid and unpaid economic activity and unpaid housework) reveal that women spend more of their time working than men in all developed and developing regions except northern America and Australia, where the hours are almost equal. (United Nations Report 1991, 81 and chap. 6 passim; see also Bergmann 1986; Hochschild 1989)

In both situations, developed and less developed, vastly more of women's work is not paid and is not considered "productive."⁷ Thus there is a wide

gap between men's and women's *recorded* economic participation. The perception that women's work is of less worth (despite the fact that in most places they do more, and it is crucial to the survival of household members) contributes to women's being devalued and having less power both within the family and outside the household (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Dasgupta 1993; Drèze and Sen 1990, chap. 4; Okin 1989b, chap. 7; Sanday 1974; Sen 1990a, 1990b). This in turn adversely affects their capacity to become economically less dependent on men. Thus they become involved in "a cycle of socially caused and distinctly asymmetric vulnerability" (Okin 1989b, 138; Drèze and Sen 1989, 56-59). The devaluation of women's work, as well as their lesser physical strength and economic dependence on men, allows them to be subject to physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse by men they live with (Gordon 1988; United Nations Report 1991, 19-20). However, in many poor countries, as I have mentioned, this power differential extends beyond the abuse and overwork of women to deprivation in terms of the feeding, health care, and education of female children—and even to their being born or not: "of 8,000 abortions in Bombay after parents learned the sex of the foetus through amniocentesis, only one would have been a boy" (United Nations Report 1991, see also Dasgupta 1993; Drèze and Sen 1989, chap. 4; Sen 1990a).

In cross-regional analyses, both Sen and Dasgupta have found correlations between the life expectancies of females relative to males and the extent to which women's work is perceived as having economic value. Thus in both rich and poor countries, women's participation in work outside the household can improve their status within the family, but this is not necessarily assured. It is interesting to compare Barbara Bergmann's (1986) analysis of the situation of "drudge wives" in the United States, who work full-time for pay and who also perform virtually all of the household's unpaid labor, with Peggy Sanday's earlier finding that, in some Third World contexts, women who do little of the work that is considered "productive" have low status, whereas many who do a great deal of it become "virtual slaves" (Sanday 1974, p. 201, Bergmann 1986, pp. 260-73).⁸

This leads us to the issue of women's economic dependence (actual and perceived). Although most poor women in poor countries work long hours each day, throughout the world they are often economically dependent on men. This, too, is "similar to but worse than" the situation of many women in richer countries. It results from so much of their work being unpaid work, so much of their paid work being poorly paid work, and, in some cases, from men's laying claim to the wages their wives and daughters earn. Feminist critics since Ester Boserup (1970) have argued that women's economic dependency on men was in many cases exacerbated by changes that devel-

opment theory and development policymakers saw only as “progressive.” All too ready to perceive women as dependents, mainstream theorists did not notice that technology, geographical mobility, and the conversion from subsistence to market economies were not, from the female point of view, “unalloyed benefits, but processes that cut women out from their traditional economic and social roles and thrust them into the modern sector where they are discriminated against and exploited, often receiving cash incomes below the subsistence level, in turn increas(ing) female dependency” (Jaquette 1982; see also Boserup 1970; Rogers, in Jaquette).⁹

In both rich and poor countries, women who are the sole economic support of families often face particular hardship. However, whereas some are, not all of the reasons for this are the same. Discrimination against women in access to jobs, pay, retention, and promotion are common to most countries, with obviously deleterious effects on female-supported families. In the United States, the average full-time working woman earns a little more than two-thirds of the pay of a full-time male worker, and three-fifths of the families with children who live in chronic poverty are single female-parent families. Many such women in both rich and poor countries also suffer from severe “time poverty.”

But the situation of some poor women in poor countries is different from—as well as distinctly worse than—that of most Western women today. It is more like the situation of the latter in the nineteenth century: even when they have no other means of support, they are actually *prohibited* (by religiously based laws or oppressive cultural norms) from engaging in paid labor. Martha Chen (forthcoming) has studied closely the situation of such women in the Indian subcontinent. Deprived of the traditional economic support of a male, they are prevented from taking paid employment by rules of caste, or *purdah*. For such women, it can indeed be liberating to be helped (as they have been by outsiders like Chen) to resist the sanctions invoked against them by family elders, neighbors, or powerful social leaders. Although many forms of wage work, especially those available to women, are hardly “liberating,” except in the most basic sense, women are surely distinctly less free if they are *not* allowed to engage in it, especially if they have no other means of support. Many employed women in Western industrialized countries still face quite serious disapproval if they are mothers of young children or if the family’s need for their wages is not perceived as great. But at least, except in the most oppressive of families or subcultures, they are *allowed* to go out to work. By contrast, as Chen’s work makes clear, the basic right to be allowed to make a much needed living for themselves and their children is still one that many women in the poorest of situations in other cultures are denied.

Here, then, is a real difference—an oppressive situation that most Western women no longer face. But to return to similarities: another that I discovered, while comparing some of our Western feminist ideas about justice with work on poor women in poor countries, has to do with the dynamics of power within the family. The differential exit potential theory that I adopt from Albert Hirschman's work to explain power within the family has recently been applied to the situation of women in poor countries (cf. Okin 1989b, chap. 7 with Dasgupta 1993 and Sen 1990b). Partha Dasgupta (1993) also uses exit theory in explaining the "not uncommon" desertion by men of their families during famines. He writes, "The man deserts [his wife] because *his* outside option in these circumstances emerges higher in his ranking than any feasible allocation within the household" (p. 329). He regards the "hardware" he employs—John Nash's game-theoretic program—as "needed if we are to make any progress in what is a profoundly complex matter, the understanding of household decisions" (p. 329). But the conclusion he reaches is very similar to the one that I reach, drawing on Hirschman's theory of power and the effects of persons' differential exit potential: any factor that improves the husband's exit option or detracts from the wife's exit option thereby gives him additional voice, or bargaining power in the relationship. Likewise, anything that improves the wife's exit option—her acquisition of human or physical capital, for example—will increase her autonomy and place her in a better bargaining position in the relationship (Dasgupta 1993, 331-33; Okin 1989b, chap. 7).¹⁰

In the United States, recent research has shown that women's and children's economic status (taking need into account) typically deteriorates after separation or divorce, whereas the average divorcing man's economic status actually improves (McLendon 1987; Weitzman 1985; Wishik 1986). This, taken in conjunction with the exit/voice theory, implies less bargaining power for wives within marriage. In poor countries, where circumstances of severe poverty combine with a lack of paid employment opportunities for women, increasing women's dependency on men, men's power within the family—already in most cases legitimized by highly patriarchal cultural norms—seems very likely to be enhanced. Although, as Dasgupta (1993) points out, Nash's formula was not intended as a normative theory, employed in this context, the theory not only *explains* (much as does my employment of Hirschman's theory) the cyclical nature of women's lack of power within the family. It also points to the injustice of a situation in which the assumption of women's responsibility for children, their disadvantaged position in the paid workforce, and their physical vulnerability to male violence all contribute to giving them little bargaining room when their (or their children's) interests conflict with those of the men they live with, thereby in turn

worsening their position relative to that of men. The whole theory, then, whether in its more or its less mathematical form, seems just as applicable to the situations of very poor women in poor countries as it is to women in quite well-off households in rich countries. Indeed, one must surely say, in this case, too, “similar but *much* worse,” for the stakes are undeniably higher—no less than life or death for more than a hundred million women, as has recently been shown (Drèze and Sen 1990, chap. 4; Sen 1990a).

Policy Implications

Some of the *solutions* to all these problems, which have been suggested recently by scholars addressing the situation of poor women in poor countries, closely resemble solutions proposed by Western feminists primarily concentrating on their own societies. (By “solutions to problems” I mean to refer to both what theorists and social scientists need to do to rectify their analyses and what policymakers need to do to solve the social problems themselves.) First, the dichotomization of public and domestic spheres must be strongly challenged. As Chen (1983) writes, in the context of poor rural regions, “So long as policy-makers make the artificial distinction between the farm and the household, between paid work and unpaid work, between productive and domestic work, women will continue to be overlooked” (p. 220). Challenging the dichotomy will also point attention to the inequities that occur within households—various forms of abuse, including the inequitable distribution of food and health care. As Papanek (1990) argues, “Given a focus on socialization for inequality, power relations within the household—as a central theme in examining the dynamics of households—deserve special attention” (p. 170).

Second, and following from the above, the unit of analysis both for studies and for much policy-making must be the individual, not the household.¹¹ Noting that, given the greater political voice of men, public decisions affecting the poor in poor countries are often “guided by male preferences, not [frequently conflicting] female needs,” Dasgupta (1993) concludes that

the maximization of well-being as a model for explaining household behaviour must be rejected. Even though it is often difficult to design and effect it, the target of public policy should be persons, not households. Governments need to be conscious of the household as a resource allocation mechanism. (Pp. 335-36)

Especially as women are even more likely in poor countries than in richer ones to be providing the sole or principal support for their households, as Chen (1983) points out, they require as much access as men to credit, skills

training, labor markets, and technologies (and, I would add, equal pay for their work) (p. 221). Policies prompting women's full economic participation and productivity are needed increasingly for the survival of their households, for women's overall socioeconomic status, and for their bargaining position within their families. As Drèze and Sen (1989) say, "important policy implications" follow from the "considerable evidence that greater involvement with outside work and paid employment does tend to go with less anti-female bias in intra-family distribution" (p. 58). Because of the quite pervasive unequal treatment of female children in some poor countries, the need for equal treatment of women by policymakers is often far more urgent than the need of most women in richer countries—but again, the issue is not so much different as "similar but more so."

IMPLICATIONS FOR THINKING ABOUT JUSTICE

Finally, I shall speculate briefly about two different ways of thinking about justice between the sexes, in cultures very different from ours. I have tried to show that, for feminists thinking about justice, John Rawls's theory, if revised so as to include women and the family, has a great deal to be said for it, and the veil of ignorance is particularly important (Rawls 1971, Okin 1989a, 1989b). If everyone were to speak only from his or her own point of view, it is unclear that we would come up with any principles at all. But the very presence of the veil, which hides from those in the original position any particular knowledge of the personal characteristics or social position they will have in the society for which they are designing principles of justice, forces them to take into account as many voices as possible and especially to be concerned with those of the least well-off. It enables us to reconcile the requirement that a theory of justice be universalizable with the seemingly conflicting requirement that it take account of the multiple differences among human beings.

In a recent paper, Ruth Anna Putnam (forthcoming), arguing a strongly antiessentialist line, and accusing Rawls and myself of varying degrees of exclusionary essentialism, considers instead an "interactive" (some might call it "dialogic") feminism: "that we listen to the voices of women of color and women of a different class, and that we appropriate what we hear" (p. 21).¹² Listening and discussing have much to recommend them; they are fundamental to democracy in the best sense of the word. And *sometimes* when especially oppressed women are heard, their cry for justice is clear—as in the case of the women Martha Chen worked with, who became quite clear

that being allowed to leave the domestic sphere in order to earn wages would help to liberate them. But we are not always enlightened about what is just by asking persons who seem to be suffering injustices what they want. Oppressed people have often internalized their oppression so well that they *have* no sense of what they are justly entitled to as human beings. This is certainly the case with gender inequalities. As Papanek (1990) writes, "The clear perception of disadvantages requires conscious rejection of the social norms and cultural ideal that perpetuate inequalities and the use of different criteria—perhaps from another actual or idealized society—in order to assess inequality as a prelude for action" (pp. 164-65). People in seriously deprived conditions are sometimes not only accepting of them but relatively cheerful—the "small mercies" situation. Deprivations sometimes become gagged and muffled for reasons of deeply rooted ideology, among others. But it would surely be ethically deeply mistaken to attach a correspondingly small value to the loss of well-being of such people because of their survival strategy.

Coming to terms with very little is no recipe for social justice. Thus it is, I believe, quite justifiable for those not thoroughly imbued with the egalitarian norms of a culture to come forth as its constructive critics. Critical distance, after all, does not have to bring with it detachment: *committed* outsiders can often be better analysts and critics of social injustice than those who live within the relevant culture. This is why a concept such as the original position, which aims to approximate an Archimedean point, is so valuable, at least in addition to some form of dialogue. Let us think for a moment about some of the cruelest or most oppressive institutions and practices that are or have been used to "brand" women—foot binding, clitoridectomy, and purdah. As Papanek shows, "well socialized" women in cultures with such practices internalize them as necessary to successful female development. Even though, in the case of the former two practices, these women may retain vivid memories of their own intense pain, they perpetuate the cruelties, inflicting them or at least allowing them to be inflicted on their own daughters.

Now, clearly, a theory of human flourishing, such as Nussbaum and Sen have been developing, would have no trouble delegitimizing such practices (Nussbaum 1992). But given the choice between a revised Rawlsian outlook or an "interactive feminist" one, as defined by Putnam, I'd choose the former any day, for in the latter, well-socialized members of the oppressed group are all too likely to rationalize the cruelties, whereas the men who perceive themselves as benefiting from them are unlikely to object. But behind the veil of ignorance, is it not much more likely that both the oppressors and the oppressed would have second thoughts? What Moslem man is likely to take the chance of spending his life in seclusion and dependency, sweltering in

head-to-toe solid black clothing? What prerevolutionary Chinese man would cast his vote for the breaking of toes and hobbling through life, if he well might be the one with the toes and the crippled life? What man would endorse gross genital mutilation, not knowing *whose* genitals? And the women in these cultures, required to think of such practices from a male as well as a female perspective, might thereby, with a little distance, gain more notion of just how, rather than perfecting femininity, they perpetuate the subordination of women to men.

Martha Nussbaum (1992) has recently written of what happens when outsiders, instead of trying to maintain some critical distance, turn to what amounts to the worship of difference. Citing some examples of sophisticated Western scholars who, in their reverence for the integrity of cultures, defend such practices as the isolation of menstruating women and criticize Western "intrusions" into other cultures, such as the provision of typhoid vaccine, Nussbaum finds a strange and disturbing phenomenon:

Highly intelligent people, people deeply committed to the good of women and men in developing countries, people who think of themselves as progressive and feminist and antiracist, are taking up positions that converge with the positions of reaction, oppression, and sexism. Under the banner of their radically and politically correct "antiessentialism" march ancient religious taboos, the luxury of the pampered husband, ill health, ignorance, and death. (P. 204)

As Nussbaum later concludes, "Identification need not ignore concrete local differences: in fact, at its best, it demands a searching analysis of differences, in order that the general good be appropriately realized in the concrete case. But the learning about and from the other is motivated by the conviction that the other is one of us" (p. 241).

As the work of some feminist scholars of development shows, using the concept of gender and refusing to let differences gag us or fragment our analyses does not mean that we should overgeneralize or try to apply "standardized" solutions to the problems of women in different circumstances. Chen argues for the value of a situation-by-situation analysis of women's roles and constraints before plans can be made and programs designed. And Papanek, too, shows how helping to educate women to awareness of their oppression requires quite deep and specific knowledge of the relevant culture.

Thus I conclude that gender itself is an extremely important category of analysis and that we ought not be paralyzed by the fact that there are differences among women. So long as we are careful and develop our judgments in the light of empirical evidence, it is possible to generalize about many aspects of inequality between the sexes. Theories developed in Western

contexts can clearly apply, at least in large part, to women in very different cultural contexts. From place to place, from class to class, from race to race, and from culture to culture, we find similarities in the specifics of these inequalities, in their causes and their effects, although often not in their extent or severity.

NOTES

1. This debate has been conducted mostly among feminist legal and political theorists. The legal literature is already so vast that it is difficult to summarize, and it is not relevant to this essay. For some references, see Okín (1991), ns. 1-3.

2. "Essentialism," employed in the context of feminist theory, seems to have two principal meanings. The other refers to the tendency to regard certain characteristics or capacities as "essentially" female, in the sense that they are unalterably associated with being female. Used in this second way, essentialism is very close to, if not always identical with, biological determinism. I am not concerned with this aspect of the term here.

3. In 1851, at an almost entirely white women's rights convention, Truth said,

That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

4. The example is that of the many black women (and few white women) who answered Joann Little's appeal on behalf of Delbert Tibbs, a black man who had been falsely accused of raping a white woman and sentenced to death. I do not think the example clearly supports Harris's assertion that black women have "a unique ambivalence" about rape, any more than it supports the assertion she claims to refute—that their experience is similar, but different in magnitude. Black women's present experience of rape is surely similar to that of white women in several important respects: many are raped (by acquaintances as well as by strangers), they fear being raped, they sometimes modify their behavior because of this fear, and they are victimized as witnesses at the trials of their rapists. But their experience is probably also worse because, in addition to all of this, they have to live with the knowledge and experience of black men's being victimized by false accusations, harsher sentences, and, at worst, lynchings. Only empirical research that involved asking them could show more certainly whether the oppression of black men as alleged rapists (or the history of master/slave rape, which Harris also discusses) makes black women's entire contemporary experience of rape different from that of white women.

5. However, the detailed division of labor between the sexes varies considerably from culture to culture. As Jane Mansbridge (1993) has recently written, in a discussion of "gratuitous gendering":

Among the Aleut of North America, for example, only women are allowed to butcher animals. But among the Ingalik of North America, only men are allowed to butcher

animals. Among the Suku of Africa, only the women can plant crops and only the men can make baskets. But among the Kaffa of the Circum-Mediterranean, only the men can plant crops and only the women can make baskets. (P. 345)

Her analysis is derived from data in George P. Murdoch and Caterina Provost, "Factors in the Division of Labor by Sex: A Cross-Cultural Analysis," *Ethnology* 12 (1973): 203-25. However, the work done by women is less likely to be "outside" work and to be paid or valued.

6. Poverty is both a relative and an absolute term. The poorest households in poor countries are absolutely as well as relatively poor and can be easily pushed below subsistence by any number of natural, social, or personal catastrophes. Poverty in rich countries is more often relative poverty (although there is serious malnutrition currently in the United States for example, and drug abuse, with all its related ills, is highly correlated with poverty). Relative poverty, although not directly life-threatening, can however be very painful, especially for children living in societies that are not only highly consumer-oriented but in which many opportunities—for good health care, decent education, the development of talents, pursuit of interests, and so on—are seriously limited for those from poor families. Single parents also often experience severe "time poverty," which can have a serious impact on their children's well-being.

7. See Dasgupta (1993) on members' perceived "usefulness" affecting the allocation of goods within poor households in poor families. Western studies as well as non-Western ones show us that women's work is already likely to be regarded as less useful—even when it is just as necessary to family well-being. So when women are really made less useful (by convention or lack of employment opportunities), this problem is compounded. Dasgupta questions simple measures of usefulness, such as paid employment, in the case of girls (1993). Where young poor women are not entitled to parental assets and their outside employment opportunities are severely restricted, the only significant "employment" for them is as childbearers and housekeepers—so marriage becomes especially valued (even though its conditions may be highly oppressive).

8. There seems to be some conflicting evidence on this matter. See Papanek (1990, 166-68).

9. This seems similar to changes in the work and socioeconomic status of women in Western Europe in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

10. I do not mean to imply here that most women, whether in developed or less developed societies, think about improving their exit options when making decisions about wage work and related issues. Indeed, in some cultures, women relinquish wage work as soon as their families' financial situation enable them to do so. But their exit option is nevertheless reduced, and their partner's enhanced, thereby in all likelihood altering the distribution of power within the family.

11. This point seems to have been first explicitly made in the context of policy by George Bernard Shaw, who argues in *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1984) that the state should require all adults to work and should allocate an equal portion of income to each—man, woman, and child.

12. As Joan Tronto has pointed out to me, the use of "appropriate" here is noteworthy, given Putnam's professed desire to treat these other women as her equals.

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