WIVES, MOTHERS AND WORKERS IN AND OUT THE DOMESTIC SPHERE

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> "I think our primary responsibility is to make our home. I think women should not work like men, then they will not be able to do the household work properly, their health will suffer, the children will not be trained and they may lose their husbands as well. After all, husbands will never consider our paid work as important as theirs" (Bangladeshi woman cited in Kabeer 1999:.135)

Introduction

The relegation of women within the domestic sphere, due to their main role as wives and mothers has been commonly considered the biggest constraint for their emancipation. Having taken for granted the universal condition of women subjection, earliest feminists and Marxists advocated a radical change in the patriarchal family structure, in order to enable women to acquire an active position in the public sphere: according to their approach women should leave their domestic duties, join the wage labour market and refuse the double burden which make them exploited by the capital system. These views have been recently criticized because they support the existence of an universal category of woman subjected by an universal category of men, and so they ignore the multiplicity of gender dynamics which characterize different cultural contexts.

The aim of this paper is to show how a cross-cultural understanding of gender relations -instead of gender dichotomies, can facilitate a deeper analysis of the status of woman within the household, which is not influenced only by her capacity to increase

the family budget. In fact, although women's participation in the labour market is commonly considered an effective way to increase their bargaining power and to acquire a certain degree of autonomy from men, it does not mean that it will make them challenge the patriarchal system who apparently subjugate them. Cultural obligations and specific gender perceptions, make women appreciate the fact to earn money, but not feel the necessity to reverse gender structure. These attitudes are often interpreted by Western scholars as "false consciousness", but this definition ignores the social dynamics which drive women's choices in their everyday lives, and make them prefer solutions which are really attainable and enable them to maintain their safety and respect from the community.

By using ethnographic data I will try to demonstrate that the renegotiation of gender relations cannot be externally driven, because it spontaneously emerges, as an historical process influenced by socio-economic factors often related to the advent of capitalism, but still locally determined. In fact it is not easily predicted because different women interpret, experience and utilize the new economical opportunities according to their own economical necessities, priorities and values. An analysis of Bangladeshi women involved in the garment industry shows how women belonging to the same cultural context perceive the same employment differently, which could be a shameful sacrifice as well as a good opportunity to renegotiate their status as a Muslim woman. Because gender relations are constituted by a flexible balance between the two sexes, the redefinition of woman's roles, necessarily imply a redefinition of men's roles. It is a dialectic process, which favours the emergence of conflicts because men often try to oppose it, in order to maintain their social position, while women have to fight for it by using different strategies. However the conflict can be considered a necessary stage of this process of adjustment which ends with the creation of a new balance, more adequate to the new socioeconomic context.

Different interpretations of the segregation of women within the domestic sphere

During the 70's the earliest feminists introduced and questioned the universal condition of women's subordination. One of the main reasons for this asymmetrical condition was found in the relegation of women within the domestic sphere, which segregates them into their "natural" role of mothers and wives; while men are the protagonists of the public sphere, which ensure them economical resources, social recognition and political power (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974).

Marxists joined the debate and, from the notion of the separate spheres, developed the concept of 'sexual division of labour' as the main reason for gender asymmetry: in patriarchal societies women are forced to perform domestic duties, and the capital benefits from it using them as 'reserve army' of labour. Women are thus underpaid and not recognized as true workers, because they are not fully involved in the material mode of production. (Bernholdt – Thomsen 1981)

Patriarchy and capital were considered the main two social forces which maintained and reproduced the sexual division of labour because they both benefit from the engagement of women in the 'reproductive' work- which is not limited to the care of the children and the domestic services, but includes also social functions that reproduce and reconfirm specific relations of marriage, procreation and filiation. The two forms of subordination, within the marriage and within the economy, tend to reinforce each other, because if a woman is fully engaged in domestic activities her position in the wage labour market is consequently weakened (Mackintosh 1981). In this context men emphasize their role as protectors and main providers, in order to perpetrate unbalanced gender relations based on control and dependency, which relegates women in their roles of mothers, considered one that nature has assigned to them.

Anthropological researches showed that gender inequities are resulting from an historical process of biological reductionism, which progressively construed an essential category of 'woman' on the basis of normative assumptions (Stolcke 1981; Kobayashi,

Peake, Benenson, Pickles 1994). The discovery that woman's subjection is the product of cultural constructions made possible the ideation of different ways to overcome it: "sexual asymmetry is not a necessary condition of human societies but a cultural product accessible to change" (Rosaldo Lamphere 1974:14). Radical feminists advocated the eradication of the private sphere and the restructuration of family relationships, in order to free women from biological constraints. Liberal feminists opted for the rejection of the private sphere in terms of enabling women to become active actors of the public arena. Socialist feminists and Marxists saw in the economic limitations derived by marriage and family duties, the main impediments to women's emancipation and postulated changes in women's status both at home and in the labour market. As Lenin stated:

"As long as women are engaged in housework their position is still a restricted one. In order to achieve the complete emancipation of women and to make them really equal with men, we must have social economy and the participation of women in general productive labour" (Lenin 1972 cited in Stolcke 1981:33)

These views have been criticized by Stolcke (1981) who believes that the social construction of gender is not equal, but considers the feminists and Marxists solutions to the problem inadequate. In fact their proposals to eliminate the domestic sphere and to incorporate women in the production brings to the negation of the procreative capacity of women and the tendency to convert feminine attributes into males attributes. As she ironically states: "To propose that women have first to become like men in order to become free is almost like suggesting that class exploitation might be ended by making it possible for workers to become capitalists." (1981:46)
During the 80's feminists moved out from these dichotomist approaches to a more complex analysis which emphasizes the interconnection between the two sexes, which are never separated in practice but rather in constant relation. (Kobayashi, Peake, Benenson, Pickles 1994)
The second step was the recognition of the crucial importance of the context, because women are not all reunited in a unique

homogenous category as western scholars and researchers assumed. The article of Chandra Mohanty (1988) is in this sense paradigmatic, in fact she first criticizes the western feminists' attitude to advocate their role as "enlighteners" and "savers" worldwide, especially toward third world women, depicted as passive victims lacking of any form of agency.

Developing the new tendencies of the eighties, nowadays feminists argue for a more plural interpretation of woman, no more fixed within universal assumptions, but related to a wider interpretation of men and to the cultural and social context in which they both act. They advocate a switch from the idea of romantic sisterhood toward a more practical strategic sisterhood, in an effort to construct coalitions based on the recognitions of differences, rather than similarities. (Baden and Goetz 2000)

A more gender-relational and cross-cultural approach in understanding women's condition worldwide has permitted scholars to look deeply at the so-called "domestic sphere" and at the social and economic dynamics that happen within the household. Sen (1990) defines it as "a site of cooperative conflict" because even if none of the members behave in a completely individualistic way, deep inequalities often characterizes the final distribution. According to the bargaining models, the final distribution is the result of a negotiation between the members of the family, in relation to their relative power, i.e. their authority. In order to understand which sources of authority are available to women, a more complex analysis is necessary which considers the interconnection between the domestic and the public sphere, because households are not autonomous and self-sufficient units, but rather are in constant relationship with other households and with the society in general (Harris 1981).

Nelson (1973) criticizes Western ethnographies which represent women in the Middle East as silently segregated at home without any influence in the "outside world". In her opinion the simplifications about these women's social world are caused by a practical difficulty for the ethnographer to penetrate their spaces and to recognize the authority that female members exercise in influencing male's decisions. In this context, kin relations are the main source of power for women, who behave as informal

"brokers" within a sub society through which invaluable information circulates and new alliances are strategically created:

"The evidence suggests that the segregation of women can alternatively be seen as an exclusion of men from a range of contacts which women have among themselves. [...] By seeking alliance and support from other women in the community, certain women achieve high social status in the community and consequently exercise political influences"   (Nelson 1973: 559)

Rassam (1980) confirms these assumption in his analysis of Moroccan women:

"In Morocco, men have complete authority over women, who in turn are expected to obey them; however a closer examination of the structure and operation of the household reveals the presence of a considerable measure of 'unassigned power' which women compete for and utilize to further their own needs and wishes"   (Rassam, 1980: 171)

These references show how the common conception of the domestic sphere as a constraint locus which deprives women of any source of authority, in the public sphere as in the household, is an ideological construction which ignores the real dynamics of power between genders. Women's subordination and domestication is never as absolute or pacific as it seems by looking "from outside"- even in the Middle East where societies are based on strict gender segregation. (Harris 1981, Nelson 1973, Rassam 1980, Abu-Lughood 2002, Messick 1986)

The relevance of women's participation in the wage market

Even if the segregation within the domestic sphere does not necessarily represent a constraint to the capacity of women to exercise important forms of agency, it is still widely documented that the redistribution of resources within the household is often characterized by gender inequalities . (Kabeer 1994). According to Maher (1981), women in Morocco hardly have access to money except for the bridewealth paid in cash and the gifts they receive

from the other members of their kin when they give birth to a son. They usually invest this money in jewellery as a strategy to acquire personal independence, because gold suits to be their own financial security to use in case of loss of men's protection like divorce and widowhood. Maher's description of women's strategies to accumulate a personal property can be extensively interpreted in term of desire to feel economically independent from men. Many authors (Kabeer 1994, 1999; Bhatty 1987, Baud 1987, Jumany 1987, Sen 1990) show how the access to wage work for women can be a way to increase their bargaining power within the household, especially when they have autonomous control over their income and they have a clear perception of it: they can take choices of consumption independently by men and actively participate in the decision making processes about how to allocate the family resources.

The importance of the inclusion of women within the wage market as a way to empower them was already theorized by Marxists, but their solutions, which require the negation of the double burden, seem inadequate for certain cultural contexts, where the segregation of women and the necessity to perform domestic tasks is not contestable. For example within those Muslim societies, where women have to behave with regard to the purdah, the involvement in the wage work is limited by the necessity to respect religious constraints, which women themselves do not want to challenge, because it would affect their reputation within the community (Wilkinson-Weber 1997).

The possibility to work outside and to avoid domestic duties seems to be never considered, but it does not mean that the inclusion in the wage work is negated to them: they work at home and they share domestic duties with other female members of the family, in order to avoid partially the double burden which was considered one of the main consequences of the sexual division of labour (Maher 1981). As Bhatty (1987) points out, women recognize the value of having an independent source of income and acquiring personal skills, but at the same time they do not want to challenge the established custom which requires them to be primarily wives and mothers.

Even if they work at home, they actively participate to increase the family income and sometimes their contribution represent up to 50% of the final budget. However the social construction, that women are mainly engaged in domestic activities, obscures their real abilities and expectations: their work is still undervalued by men, as "leisure or subsidiary activity", in fact the same job performed by men is much more recognised and compensate. (Singh and Kelley- Viitanen 1987). Wilkinson-Weber (1997, 2004) analysing gender relations in the chickan garment industry of Lucknow shows how the fact that the embroidery's production was traditionally a male activity, enforces gender inequalities in the labour market: men are still considered "professionals" even if the production is almost completely shifted in women's hands. Although some women are highly skilled, they have no power within the market and are forced to accept the work conditions required by their male agents, who can easily substitute them with someone else if they are not satisfied. The social necessity to follow the notion of purdah makes women dependent to middle-men, who organize the production and take the highest percentage of the final profit.

Different authors (Singh ans Kelles-Viitanen 1987, Jumani 1987, Phillips and Taylor 1980) believe that the organization of women could be the solution to improve their condition, as women as well as workers, and theorize different measures which should help them to acquire higher payment and social recognition. But women seem not to be so receptive to the idea of organizing themselves in cooperatives or unions, considered 'men's stuff'. The 'familiar' atmosphere of production and the autonomy they have in organizing their time obscures the low treatment they receive: they prefer working at home as piece-rate workers because it is more appropriate for them, although more exploitative (Baud 89).

It is very hard to ideate an effective strategy of intervention to empower women in a wider sense, because they have different expectations according to the socio-cultural contexts, which are very hard to predict. As Nila Kabeer states:

"To attempt to predict at the outset of an intervention precisely how it will change women's lives, without some knowledge of ways of 'being

and doing' which are realizable and valued by women in that context, runs into the danger of prescribing the process of empowerment and thereby violating its essence, which is to enhance women's capacity for self-determination"   (1999: 462)

Kibria's research about Bangladeshi women working in the garment industry (1995) shows how women's access to wage income do not challenge the affirmed patriarchal system: instead of generating an egalitarian shift in gender relations, it just reconfirms it in a new way. The reason lies not in the imposition of men's authority, but rather on the women's recognitions of it: they respect and recognize the male household as the benevolent dictator who deserves to organize family expenditure because he is able and just in doing it. He is the main breadwinner and, although they earn enough to challenge his position, they are not interested in doing so, because they do not want to humiliate their protector. As a married garment worker declares:

"It's natural that I give my wage to my husband. It is the custom of our society to cater to the wishes of the husband. For a woman, heaven is at her husband's feet. In this world, a woman without a husband is not better off than a beggar on the street" (cited in Kibria 1995: 289)

To interpret these attitudes of submissiveness and self-sacrifice as "false consciousness" could be misleading for two reasons. First of all because they are often an expression of a conscious strategy of risk-minimizing in a context where women's well-being is related to the prosperity of the whole household and their security is connected with male's external authority (Kabeer 1995).
Moreover it is important to realize that the opportunity to challenge the patriarchal family system, although materially attainable through the incorporation into wage work, are not conceived to be possible, because they are located far outside the "common sense" which drives the behaviours of the agents in their everyday life:

"The availability of alternatives at the discursive level, of being able to at least imagine the possibility of having chosen differently, is thus crucial to the emergence of a critical consciousness, the process by which people move from a position of unquestioning acceptance of the social order to a critical perspective on it." (Kabeer 1999:441)

The endogenous renegotiation of gender roles

Even if women hardly challenge their traditional status, it does not mean that important processes of social changes regarding gender relations will never occur. In his analysis of North African weavers Messick (1986) states that "subordinate discourses are historically specific"(1986:217), in the sense that they are submitted to a process of historical transformation. If in the past women did not consider at all the idea of working, now a "feminine proletariat" is emerging, which is an expression of political and economic changes. Weaving in Azrou was traditionally a women's activity, transmitted by mother to daughter and directed to domestic consumption; now it is becoming a production directed to the market which involves only skilled and specialized women, while the others are busy at school or in other jobs. Through this analysis Messick interestingly demonstrates how the transition to capitalism is provoking the gradual dissolution of the subordinate discourse, because the domestic sphere has been incorporated into market relations through the involvement of women into the wage market - which could represent a step for their empowerment but also the cause of new forms of subjection.

Kibra (1995) and Kabeer (2000), in researching Bangladeshi women working in the garment industry, focus on the economic changes which caused a progressive impoverishment of the country - especially in the rural areas. In the first stages of the garment industries' opening, only women without male support or belonging to poor families joined the job in the factory, because working outside the house is considered shameful as it represents a threat to the moral code based on the principle of sexually-segregated spheres. Apparently only the ones who are in a condition of economical necessity have the courage to face such a public disapproval:

"I am in need, that is why I have to come to work, otherwise I would have stayed at home, done namaaz-roza [prayer and fasting]. I feel bad, but what else can I do, I have to live somehow... But we are being sinful

because it is a sin if other man see you. That I walk through the streets is a sin" (cited in Kabeer 2000:88)

Most of the women are moved by necessity only, therefore they perceive their involvement in the garment industry as sinful and suffer for the fact that the community blame them. However there are also other responses to the public disfavour which demonstrate that Bangladeshi women experience differently their employment, although they formally belong to the same 'monolithic' culture. (Kabeer 2000, Kibra 1995). The necessity to work has gradually brought some women to reinterpret the purdah in a more practical way –as shown by Kabeer's interviewed:

I feel my heart is good, if I keep my faith, if I say my prayers and follow my religion, I can still have a job. I can mix with anyone and know that my mind is purer than yours. People say things and one should not listen. One should rely on what one's heart says. And my heart says I am pure. (cited in Kabeer 2000:92)

Women's involvement in the garment industry, which at first represented a quick response to the economic crisis, later provided an expedient for women to review and improve their status within family and society. Kabeer (2000) categorizes women in relation to their personal agency and the family consensus about the decision to work in the factory. Although most of them are women who work for necessity and consequently receive the consensus of the family, there are some of them who expresses a new trend. They are girls or women who decide to work through personal choice, in order to acquire financial independency and/or contribute to the family income, even when not strictly necessary. Most of those interviewed confirm the so-called "ideology of the maternal altruism" affirming that they decided to work to improve the wellbeing of the family (like providing a better education for their children), but there are also those who admit that they took this decision to have the opportunity of being outside the house:

"I have been working for three years and I like it. I don't like it at home. In the factory, everyone is working and even if there is no conversation, the day passes quite well. At home there is nothing, no hard work, only

cooking and cleaning so I don't like it there. It is quiet and lonely at home. In the factory there are more people and we are all working together" (2000:113)

The fact that different women can feel the involvement in the garment industry as a source of individual improvement as well as its opposite, shows that it is not possible to unilaterally define the notion of 'empowerment' as every person has different expectations of life. Kabeer (1999) finds three indivisible dimensions which help to define this notion, whose "resources" are only one of these, together with "agency" and "achievements". The connection between these three dimensions provides a more culturally-relative notion of empowerment, it implies a process of change and, above all, it is aimed to enable women the possibility to choose. The fact that social and economical changes give them new real achievable alternatives, make them acquire a critical consciousness about their status and enable them to change it:

"Structures shape individual resources, agency and achievements. They also define the parameters within which different categories of actors are able to pursue their interests, promoting the voice and agency of some and inhibiting that of others. And finally, they help to shape individual interests so that how people define their goals and what they value will reflect their social positioning as well as their individual histories, tastes and preferences". (Kabeer 1999: 461)

Some women still share the role that their tradition attributes to them and do not feel the relegation within the domestic sphere as an unjust condition which deserves to be challenged. On the other hand, others use the opportunity provided by the economic change as a way to change their status and to negotiate gender relations, although it is not a easy choice to take.
Kabeer (2000) shows how women who decide to work outside without a condition of real need, often face the opposition of the male members of the family who fear that their employment will compromise their honour or their ability to perform domestic work. It is especially hard for husbands to accept having a wife working in the public sphere, which means within the sphere traditionally assigned exclusively to them: they feel threatened in

their position as the main providers of the household and they feel the shame of appearing not able to fulfil their breadwinning role.

"I was opposed to her working because when a woman earns, it does not look good. People say that she is feeding herself. People think is bad, I thought so too. Where did she go, what did she do I forbade her to work, but she went anyway. I used to get hungry but she went anyway. Now I don't feel so bad about it" (cited in Kabeer 2000:114)

When socio-economic changes occur, the previous gender structure is challenged because it does not fit anymore with the new context and changes become necessary. The roles of men and women gradually move toward new balances, but it hardly happens without the emergence of conflicts and resistances. Bolak's analysis (1997) of Turkish families in urban areas, shows how the employment of both husband and wife in full time work outside the house provoke the rise of conflicts about the performance of the domestic tasks. Although some women still believe that the care of the house and the children represent their own duty- which they perform during their free time, others start to perceive the double burden as unfair and demand their husband's help. This process of adjustment is not easy, because men hardly accept to review their role, especially in patriarchal societies like the Turkish one:

"When effects of urbanization, female employment, and men's reduced economic power provide an occasion for a shift in the boundaries between the sexes, how rights and responsibilities are negotiated depend on the context of situational constraints and opportunities as well as cultural meanings" (1997:429)

In Western countries women have the opportunity to embody significant social positions and to earn a high wage but as a consequence they are too busy to perform domestic labour. Due to the shortage of appropriate public welfare services, the solution is often the employment of another woman, often drawn from abroad, who embodies the role of housewife and enables the one 'in a career' to spend most of the day at work:

"Women have joined the law, academia, medicine, business, but such professions are still organised for men with families who are free of

family responsibilities. Most careers are based on a well-known pattern: doing professional work, [...] and minimising family life by finding someone else to do it." (Hochshild 2000: 141)

Although the purchase of domestic labour represents a solution to gender conflicts over the division of domestic work, scholars have shown that this formula causes important inequalities at the global level. In fact, the employment of foreign carers by rich Western families, provokes a phenomenon called "global care chain" defined by Hochschild as "a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring" (2000:131). In fact the woman who is employed is herself married with dependent children and she pays someone else to take care of them in her native country while she is working abroad. The woman employed by the migrant, who is the one at the end of the chain usually belongs to a poorer household, thus she cannot afford a domestic worker for her own family and has to rely on a member of her family, like an older daughter, to provide unpaid care for her siblings.

The chain reflects the international division of labour as well as local divisions of class, because the migrant usually belongs to the middle-class and her decision to migrate is not driven by necessity, but rather by the desire to ensure higher standards of living for her children and a good education. In order to do that she spends years far away from her family taking care of someone else's children to whom she spontaneously transfers her emotional attachment- as the Philippine woman interviewed by Parrenas (1998): "The only thing you can do is give all your love to the child [the American one she is taking care of]. In my absence from my children, the most I could do with my situation is give all my love to that child" (cited in Hochschid 2000:130). This phenomenon shows scholars that not only does the chain provoke inequalities in terms of labour, but also in emotional terms, because the rich child benefits from "surplus love" while the poorer one suffers from maternal deprivation during the long absence from his mother (Hochschild 2000, Yeates 2005).

It is evident that these international strategies are practically effective because they are based on inequalities transferred down

the chain, and also on gender stereotypes which require women to perform domestic duties- as Parrenas (1998) points out: "it is a transnational division of labour that is shaped simultaneously by the system of global capitalism, the patriarchal system of the sending country and the patriarchal system of the receiving countries" (cited in Hochschild 2000: 138). The fact that the employment of a 'substitutive woman' to perform domestic duties within certain social contexts is considered the only 'solution', demonstrates that the sexual division of labour within the household has not been overcome, but rather has been deceived thanks to the opportunities offered by the global capitalism.

A recent study realized by a team of American psychologists (Askari S.F, Liss M, Mindy J, Staebell S.E. and Axelson S.J. 2010) on a representative group of unmarried, heterosexual young adults about their expectation of the percentage of chores they will do and those they wish to do when they will be married shows a new mainstream for the next generations. Indeed it shows that there is concordance between the two sexes about their respective wishes, but not about their real expectations: both men and women express the desire to have an equal relationship based on mutual help, but women expect not to have it. So, although men are changing their attitude and prefer to have a career-oriented partner who shares responsibilities inside and outside the domestic sphere, women are still connected to the old stereotype and do not trust that men's view is changing toward a more egalitarian society.

The fact that even in those societies where apparently the equality is reached because young men want it for their future wives, there is still the memory of the traditional system which influences young women's expectations. This is the demonstration that the renegotiation of gender roles is a dialectic process, historically and culturally determined, whose adjustments are not immediate because it can involve more than one generation.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown how the debated universal subjection of women is not necessarily connected with their relegation within the domestic sphere, due to their social role as housewives. Although this role is not biologically determined, but normative, the solution cannot be found in the radical negation of feminine attributes, toward an artificial and universal equalization of the two sexes which overcomes local perceptions of gender duties. The notion of empowerment is so relative that its realization requires a contextual analysis directed to the definition of resources, achievements and agency of the women who are supposed to be empowered. In fact ethnographic data shows that women, even in gender segregated societies, are not so interested in challenging the patriarchal system and declining the religious constraints derived by the purdah although the possibility to join the wage market, to acquire economical autonomy and to abandon the domestic sphere has been offered to them. That is not to say that women never want to change their status, but that their expectations are neither obvious nor homogenous.

By analysing how Bangladeshi women react to the opening of garment industries, Kabeer demonstrated not only that the same phenomenon provokes different reactions according to women's age, class, religious conceptions and personal expectations but also that endogenous processes of economical and social changes make women spontaneously reflect on their status within the household and within the community, without the necessity of an external subject who proposes for them a defined and fixed strategy of empowerment.   In Western countries, where the majority of women are nowadays employed full-time in wage labour, the employment of another woman to perform domestic duties has represented a solution of compromise for many wealthy families, although it implies important inequalities on different levels.

With this paper I have tried to demonstrate that the redefinition of gender boundaries cannot be the product of a specific ideology aimed at an universal idea of gender equality, but rather it is the historical result of the adaptation to different socio-economic contexts. Anthropology can provide an important contribution in

researching formulas which seek to 'empower' women, by emphasising endogenous processes of gender renegotiation which have already been taking place in those social environments where women have started to demand a higher recognition and power of choice within their households.

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