

Powerful or Powerless?:

The Impact of the Formal/Informal Dichotomy  
on the Analysis of Women's Informal Labour in Latin America

Laura A. Suski

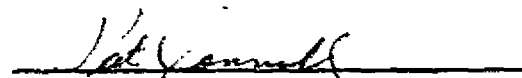
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## **Abstract**

**Laura A. Suski**

### **Powerful or Powerless?:**

**The Impact of the Informal/Formal Dichotomy on  
the Analysis of Women's Informal Labour in Latin America**

**Oct. 10th, 1995**

In most of the general thinking on the informal sector, the informal/formal division marks a distinction between a "modern", capitalist formal economy and a more "backward", subsistent informal economy. Both Marxist and neoliberal approaches to the analysis of the informal sector reify the modernist assumption that "development" is a movement from the informal to the formal. In this dichotomous thinking, those working in the informal sector become typified as powerless "victims" of poverty. While neoliberal approaches suggest that some of these "victims" can become "microentrepreneurs", and in turn, are potentially "powerful", the sector is still assumed to be an economically inferior site. Feminist analyses, particularly the liberalist feminist approach, remain mired in this binary thinking. Feminist analyses argued against the invisibility of women's experience in the informal sector discourse. However, in making women's experience visible, much of the feminist analyses did not address the multiple, contingent, and shifting nature of subjectivity and the importance of language. This thesis proposes an alternative approach to informal sector analyses which draws on postmodern concerns with dichotomies, power, subjectivity, language, experience and voice. The aim is twofold: (1) to deconstruct modernist and dualist thinking in the literature on the informal sector in Latin America, and (2), through the revisiting of various analyses which incorporated the voices of Latin American women, work towards a more nuanced analysis which regards women's informal sector experience as contingent.

### Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to Jane Parpart who made me feel like I was not alone in this endeavour. She provided inspiration and support for the original idea, and stuck around for the painful struggle of trying to put it down on paper. Martha MacDonald provided insightful comments and always balanced the "negative" with the "positive" which I greatly appreciated on several occasions. Pat Connelly volunteered to act as a reader and trudge through the thesis at the last moment.

As this thesis sits on my shelf, it will remind me of many things. I would like to thank the people who give it these reminders. Ben gave me a computer, and carried my photocopies through Christie Pitts, and gave me countless other less tangible, but equally symbolic things. Jenny and Alan gave me a home, and a family and took me tubing on the Saugeen. My family gave me care packages and phonecalls. Arlene gave me a sister in thesis writing. Stacey gave me the lawnchairs on which I sat all summer. Ted wrote me wise words in letters. My fellow students and friends, especially David, Andina and Paula, gave me potlucks, trips to P.E.I, and the grad lounge.

Despite these many acknowledgements, the final product is my responsibility. It is not as I imagined it to be, however, it has not discouraged my desire to imagine. I am thankful of this.

## INTRODUCTION

The term "informal sector" first appeared in the development literature in the early 1970s and has gained wide use since. Much of the general thinking on informality makes a particular statement about economies of the South'. A distinction between formal and informal sectors largely implies that these economies are constructed around a dual economy model. In this model, economies of the South are not homogenous spheres, but in fact, are comprised of a "modern" capitalist formal sector and a less productive, subsistent, "marginal" informal sector.

In the writing on the informal sector in Latin America<sup>2</sup>, mainstream liberal perspectives usually view the

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<sup>1</sup> Several terminologies have been used to describe the North/South division. These include: rich/poor, developed/undeveloped, developed/less developed, and first world/third world. All of these labels are problematic. Most of these labels rely on using the "developed" countries as the definitional base for what development is. Any country which does not fit this definition then becomes "undeveloped". Much of the process of defining development has been plagued by cultural, racial and sexist basis. Moreover, it is a process which has largely focused on economic indicators of development. Thus, I use the Northern and Southern geographic division with some trepidation and with the acknowledgement of its generalizations (i.e. "development" is not a Northern phenomena and "underdevelopment" a Southern phenomena) and its inherent biases.

<sup>2</sup> In this analysis, Latin America does not include the Caribbean. Again, this label is not entirely satisfactory and has several historical and western biases. It may overemphasize the "latin" in the identity of these countries. For a discussion of this label and alternatives for a more "positive" identity definition see:

Albo, Xavier, (1993), "Our Identity Starting from Pluralism in the Base", Boundary 2, (20), 3, 18-33.

informal sector in two ways. For the most part, the sector is seen as backward and inferior in comparison to the more productive formal sector. The mere existence of the informal economy marks the failure of the formal economy to provide employment (see for example Tokman, 1982). This view holds that the sector is a site of surplus labour, thus, those working in this sector are usually characterized as "victims" of unemployment. These "transitional beings would eventually disappear in the process of assimilation" as the backward ways of informality are replaced by a more developed economic system (Seligman, 1989: 719).

More recent liberal and neoliberal analyses, particularly the work of Peruvian economist Hernando DeSoto (1986), see the informal sector as a result of legal and bureaucratic "strait jacketing". They believe that the provision of credit and technical knowledge, and with the elimination of excessive bureaucratic interference, the microentrepreneurs of the informal sector will be able to exercise their "entrepreneurial spirit". While the people working in the sector remain relatively powerless, they are seen as potential microentrepreneurs and their power may be realized. Thus, DeSoto and others like him, contend that the informal sector can contribute significantly to economic and social progress (Hope, 1993).

Neomarxist and Marxist approaches have focused on the exploitative nature of the informal sector (see for example

Beneria and Roldan, 1987). The informal sector is largely viewed as a site of surplus extraction; the formal sector is dependent on the informal sector to lower the costs of formal production (see for example Berger, 1989). In this sense, people working in this sector are typified as victims of the oppressive dynamics of the formal sector.

While Marxist and liberal analyses (and variations of each) view informality differently, these analyses share common limitations. First, the thinking on informality is trapped within a modernist binary. The informal/formal dichotomy reifies the underdeveloped/developed dichotomy. While the people working in this sector may be depicted as potentially "powerful" or inherently "powerless", these analyses maintain the assumption that "development" is a movement from "backwardness" to "modernity"; a movement from the informal to the formal. This dichotomous thinking limits an understanding of the dynamics of power in this sector as informality becomes inherently tied to a state of powerlessness.

Second, both Marxist and liberal analyses, if they address actual lived experience, generally do so in an uncritical way. Much of the research of both schools has not focused on individual experience as survey data has been the key research tool. Feminist analyses of the informal sector which draw on these perspectives, although criticizing the general absence of women's experience in the discourse,



nevertheless, tend to use experience in a similarly simplistic way. They often use experience as evidence of a "composite" informal worker. The multiple, contingent and shifting nature of subjectivities is neglected. Further, little attention is paid to the dynamics of language or to women's explanations of their own experience. In the continued use of a universal, monolithic "woman of the South" as the subject of analysis, women become lumped together in one undifferentiated group (Mohanty, 1991).

Current analyses of the informal sector have not overcome these limitations. This thesis proposes an alternative approach which draws on postmodern<sup>1</sup> concerns with power, language, binarisms, multiple identities and subjectivities. The thesis not only critiques existing models of the informal economy, but also revisits research which used the experiences and the voices of women to inform and assess the models. By using the tools of postmodern

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<sup>1</sup> There is much debate as to what the label "postmodern" refers to, and whether the prefix "post" is appropriate. See for example:

Rosenthal, Michael, (1992), "What was post-modernism?", Socialist Review, 22, (3), 83-105. The ambiguity of the term is part of its essence. Postmodernism is the result of many trends, most importantly the attack on the functionalism of modern art, philosophical critiques of structuralism, and economic analyses of post-industrial societies (Callinicos, 1989 as cited in Parpart and Marchand, 1995). Some key postmodern thinkers include Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida. The term is used throughout as a loose label for analyses coming out of the above mentioned trends. Critical to the present analysis will be postmodern perspectives on subjectivity. This issue will be taken up in Chapter One.

analysis, the dichotomized thinking on informality can be transcended. Further, the experience of women as contingent subjects can be integrated into an informal sector analysis which can thus take account of the complexities of both women's lives and the discourses which discuss these lives.

### Chapter Outlines

The present analysis concentrates on a particular body of literature: the writings in English on women in the urban informal sector in Latin America<sup>4</sup>. The analysis is divided into three chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. The chapters are divided as follows: (1) a review and analysis of gender and development theory, (2) a review and analysis of the informal sector discourse, and finally, (3) a number of writings which have utilized the voices of Latin American women in the discussion of the informal sector will be examined in order to critically assess their insights from a postmodern perspective. The separation of these discussions into various chapters is largely for ease of presentation and clarity. However, it should be reiterated that it is the intersection/conflict of these issues which is critical.

The first chapter outlines the various streams of

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<sup>4</sup> This analysis focuses on urban informality only and does not include forms of rural informal employment. The majority of the literature on Latin America takes a similar focus.

gender and development thought, with an emphasis on postmodernism. This chapter explores the ways in which women of the South have been discussed in the development discourse. By outlining the central themes of analysis, one can uncover the influences which shape the presentation and re-presentation of women's experiences. This chapter also examines the language of gender and development. Terms including reproduction/production, the sexual division of labour, power/powerlessness and practical and strategic gender needs are briefly discussed. The purpose of this discussion is to depict how the use of specific terminologies, most importantly dichotomized labels, has served to frame research questions.

The second chapter is a review of theoretical perspectives on the informal sector. It begins with a focus on the general discourse about the informal sector, moves to a more focused analysis of the writings on women working in the informal sector, and ends with a critical analysis of these perspectives. The critiques draws on postmodern concerns with dichotomies. The chapter briefly outlines the debates regarding the definition of the term with an aim to illustrate how these debates reflect the evolution in both development discourse and gender and development discourse. Issues regarding gender and development perspectives which were addressed in the first chapter will be applied to the discussion of the informal sector literature.

The purpose of the final chapter is to examine whether the inclusion of the voices of women in research and theory transforms informal sector analysis, and further, to map out what this transformed discourse may look like. While it may be important to make space for the voices of women, it is equally important to understand the dynamics of this inclusion. The chapter includes a discussion of testimonial literature as this form of literature/research presents "voice" in perhaps its purest form. It concludes with the presentation and analysis of various examples of research which have included voice in some form and degree.

#### Maintaining the Dialogue

Studies on the experience of women in the informal sector are profoundly affected by the evolution of the discourse on feminism and the discourse on the informal sector. It is most fruitful to address this interaction as a dialogue. By its very nature, the effect of dialogue is sometimes chaotic and at other times harmonic (Brown, 1991). There is much discussion of the so-called impasse of development: the suggestion that old social and political perspectives have failed to interpret current changes. However, Arturo Escobar argues that despite the existence of a radical reinterpretation of an alternative development, "the imaginary of development continues to hold sway" (1992:21). Critiques of development have also reached an

impasse, purports Escobar, as they have failed to produce viable alternatives to the mainstream development project (1992).

While postmodernism may incite a certain "playfulness" about difference, it is crucial to distinguish between "legitimate diversity and illegitimate inequities" (Lechner, 1993: 131). In the analysis of texts, one must also question the connection between "words" and "things". Women working in the informal sector have a material reality - most often of extreme poverty - which should not be sifted out in the process of textual deconstruction. The aim of the present analysis is not only deconstruction but also to consider alternative formulations.

In questioning the depiction of women as "victims", one must also question the paths to the label of "empowerment". Indeed, in professing the hegemonizing affects of modernity, the question must be posed as to whether Latin Americans are passive victims in the process of modernization or active participants? (Quijano, 1993). As DeSoto's interpretation suggests, the informal sector may be the perfect free market and its participants "competitive entrepreneurs". Thus, power and powerlessness function dynamically in this sector. In the case of women, understanding this dynamic functioning is crucial. If differential experiences are ignored and power is constructed along models of the universal subject, we run the risk of "remaining mired in androcentric Western

thinking and fail to provide a genuine alternative to mainstream development theory and practice" (Hirshman, 1995: 53).

CHAPTER ONE: GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT THOUGHT AND THE  
CHALLENGES OF POSTMODERNISM

Feminist approaches to development share many of the modernist assumptions of liberal and Marxist thinking about development. This chapter outlines these tendencies, and in turn, discusses how these tendencies limit the analysis of the informal sector. Through the critical examination of concepts such as equality, difference and power, the discussion outlines the binary thinking of the socialist Gender and Development (GAD) perspective and of the liberalist Women in Development (WID) perspective.

New approaches which draw on postmodern critiques and concerns will also be outlined. The key ideas of current postmodern writings on development will be reviewed with the aim to illustrate how this approach may provide new insights into the analysis of gender and the informal sector, particularly in the rethinking of voice and experience. The language of development will also be addressed both as an example of the modernist influences on development and as evidence of the "use" of postmodernism in the deconstruction of binarisms.

## I. CHAPTER ONE: GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT THOUGHT

### 1. The Legacy of Liberalism

Current feminist thought cannot be comfortably categorized into the "convenient tripartite division" of Marxist feminist thought, liberal feminism, and radical feminism (Gatens, 1992: 120). Using this common ideological classification to understand the women's movement may restrict the scope and complexity of the movement itself (Bartky, 1990). Moreover, many feminist theorists working within the realm of development do not openly adhere to any specific theoretical approach (see for example Brydon and Chant, 1989: 8). However, despite the inability of traditional theoretical labels to capture the variability of much current thought, certain theoretical approaches have had significant effects on the evolution of gender and development discourse, research and practice. Perhaps the theoretical approach which has had the most far reaching effects is that of liberal feminism. This feminist perspective has dominated the thinking about women and development since its inception. The results of this domination have been both progressive and regressive (Moser, 1989; Rathgeber, 1990; Connelly et al., 1995).

Liberal feminist thought finds its roots in liberal political theory. As such, it holds a conception of human nature that focuses on the ability of humans to act with



rationality. Reasoning, autonomous individuals in a "just society" can exercise freedom and find self-fulfilment (Tong, 1989:11). The early roots of liberal feminism, as found in the writings of John Locke and John Stuart Mill, stresses the importance of all people to act as individuals (Agonito, 1977; Butler, 1991)<sup>5</sup>. However, it was John Stuart Mill's The Subjection of Women which is considered one of liberalism's most "incisive arguments" for equal opportunity (Shanley, 1991: 177).<sup>6</sup> Here, Mill argued that although women appeared to be inferior, this was merely a consequence of social pressure and educational bias (Bryson, 1992).

The rise of liberalism in the early nineteenth century paralleled western society's devotion to the Enlightenment project. As the specialization of knowledge increased, and the affirmation of the validity of the scientific method, knowledge itself became a "science". These beliefs held on to a Cartesian notion of subjectivity which suggested that subjects had the ability to reason about their existence;

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<sup>5</sup> Melissa Butler contends that Locke represented a 'limited' patriarchal view. She argues that by examining social relations, primarily in The Second Treatise, Locke illustrated how nonpolitical relationships challenge the patriarchal power dynamic of ruler-subject.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Lyndon Shanley also makes the interesting and contentious argument that Mill's essay transcends liberalism's focus on individual rights by stressing the importance of 'friendship' for progress. In his critique of marital inequality, as exemplified in a master/slave relationship, Shanley argues that Mill lays the groundwork for liberal policy which promotes individual rights which will allow friendship, in marriage and in other social relations, to prosper (1991:177).

the subject was "unitary, autonomous, individualist and rational" (MacDonald, E. 1991: 45). Much of the struggle for liberal feminists centred around proving that women could be "Cartesian subjects". Reason was not something that women had been excluded from, rather, it was something that had been defined within political and philosophical conventions as specifically "unfeminine" and opposing traditional female roles (Gatens, 1992: 121).

Liberalism of the early nineteenth century supported the notion that difference was a state of equality, but the position was rather a precarious one. Although, as Mill argued, women were "as good as men", so too were women considered different (Bryson, 1992: 55). Women and the dominant conception of political society were seen as naturally unsuited for each other (Gatens, 1992). In its feminist mandate, liberal feminism considers the causes of women's oppression to be directly linked to women's lack of equal civil rights, educational and employment opportunities (Jagger and Rothenberg, 1984:83). Once women become economic and political equals to men, they too can become subjects.

As Jane Flax contends (1992: 193), the appeal of equality is obvious, it has functioned as the "dualistic opposite of difference and domination". In turn, it has allowed feminists to equate the end of difference with the end of domination. Difference, inequality and power become inextricably linked. Current critiques of liberal feminist

theory have concentrated on the tension between equality and difference (Elshtain, 1992; Cavarero, 1992; Bryson, 1992; Phelan, 1989). Adriana Cavarero (1992) argues that by denying sexual difference, liberal equality theories deny that women can be subjects in political theory:

...[F]emale sexual difference is not just one of the differences that the male/universal subject enumerates among those differences which, modelled upon himself, make up a composite called 'society'. Female sexual difference, if it is not the victim of powerful repression, implies that in society there should be- above all and before any difference whatsoever- two different subjects: two and different, not one and homologous (42).

The feminist experience has modified existing ideas of equality by suggesting that both social and biological sex roles complicate a liberal supposition of equality (Bryson, 1992). While some liberal feminists argue that the equality/difference binarism does not necessarily lead to a homogenization of difference (see for example James, 1992; Elshtain, 1992), it becomes difficult to imagine an equality - liberal or otherwise - "as apart from some measure of sameness" (Flax, 1992: 194).

## 2. Liberal Feminism and Development

Although the liberal feminist approach has been rejected by many feminists and considered to be of little value in the challenge against the structural causes of women's subordination (see for example Ramazanglou, 1989; Phelan, 1989; Bryson, 1992), the liberal feminist approach

to development, or Women in Development (WID), continues to dominate the development sphere. The continued theoretical influence of the "WID regimes" is framed by both a colonial discourse and a liberal discourse on markets (Chowdry, 1995).

Liberalism, when related to development theory, is easily consolidated with modernization theory. Modernity, as applied to development, can be understood as the common behavioral system connected to the urban, industrial societies of Western Europe and North America. The system is characterized by a rational and scientific world view, continued economic growth and a continued application of science and technology (Dube, 1988: 77).<sup>7</sup> As modernization envisioned the key to development as the movement towards highly productive industrialized societies, liberal feminists maintained that the end of women's oppression would be seen when women were integrated into this productive process (see for example Jaquette, 1982).

Essentially, mainstream neoliberal development theory

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<sup>7</sup> This is a very limited and narrow definition of modernity. For example, in literary criticism, modernity refers to the general literary movement which characterized the first half of the twentieth century. In current postmodern thought, modernity has taken on a definition which crosses several disciplines- political theory, literary theory, art and philosophy. The cited definition is focused on the area of development studies only and is necessarily simplified by this focus. For a concise discussion of the broadness of the term 'modernity' see pages 22-24 in:

Jardine, Alice, (1985), Gynesis: Configurations of Women and Modernity. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

upholds a notion of negative liberty; that individual freedom is gained when the actions of others do not hinder the individual from pursuing his or her activities or goals (Chowdry, 1995). The free individual in the free market is able to "develop". However, outside the domain of the ideal free market, a concept of negative liberty is rarely held in development policy and practice.

Using the modernization theory framework, researchers began to study the impact of industrialization on women. This approach signified an important shift away from welfare oriented development practice which assumed that motherhood was the most important role of women, to an approach which emphasized the role of women in the productive sphere (Moser, 1989: 1799).<sup>\*</sup> The emergence of anti-poverty approaches in the early 1970s focused on women's poverty and the provision of basic needs<sup>\*</sup>. This focus, however, served to reiterate the characterization of women as a homogeneous group of voiceless victims of poverty and often neglected the structural causes of poverty (Chowdry, 1995).

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<sup>\*</sup> Perhaps the most influential work in this regard is Ester Boserup's Woman's Role in Economic Development published in 1970. For an in depth analysis and critique of this work see:

Beneria, Lourdes and Gita Sen, (1981), "Accumulation, Reproduction, and Women's Role in Economic Development: Boserup Revisited", Signs, 7, (2), 279-298.

<sup>\*</sup> The various approaches within the WID framework have been divided into four distinct categories. Mayra Buvinic (1983) divided the approaches into two major groupings: equity and poverty oriented. Caroline Moser (1989) added to these divisions efficiency and empowerment.

The 1980s were distinguished by the dominance of neoliberal economic policies. In response to severe stabilization programs, women were identified as an "underutilised resource for development" (Goetz, 1991: 139). It is this economic preoccupation which forms the basis of standard critiques of the WID approach. With its excessive emphasis on the production, WID neglected women's relationship to reproduction.<sup>10</sup> As women became purposefully integrated into waged work, the effect was an increased burden on the work day as women's responsibility for reproductive labour remained untouched. The WID approach has maintained the presumption of liberalism which insists that the common good is merely the sum of individual desires (Phelan, 1989: 17). However, critics argue that while at the individual level the provision of an income may improve the economic bargaining position of some women, it does very little to transfer itself into the overall benefit of women as a gender and to challenge the structures which deem women subordinate (Young, 1992: 8).

Ironically, the interaction of liberal understanding of equality and of economic preoccupation within WID discourse becomes somewhat problematic. As argued by Douglas Lunnis, a

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<sup>10</sup> I use the reproductive/productive role with some discomfort and with the acknowledgement that such a distinction may be based on preconceived notions (often male biased) of 'productivity'. This debate will be taken up on page 50 of this chapter and will appear as a constant theme throughout the analysis.

notion of equality is not easily integrated into the realm of economics:

Inequality, is not, in short, an economic problem. Strictly speaking, economics has no vocabulary for describing inequality as a problem, but only as a fact: 'justice' is not a term in economic science. If inequality is a problem, it is a political problem. Its solution is not a matter of development, but of shaking off of burdens (1992: 50).

A positivist notion of inequality is limiting. Liberalism is often rejected by those whose oppression cannot be defined in a systematic and measured way (Phelan, 1989: 17).

In the WID approach women became the "patients" of development; they were to be "treated". With increased education and updated technological methods, women would no longer be "obstacles" to productivity, but rather, important contributors (Maguire, 1984). Nonetheless, as "obstacles" or as "patients", women of the South have often been represented as "traditional" and "non-liberated" and waiting to be "developed" (Chowdry, 1995). Likewise, the development "expert" emerged as the bearer of the knowledge of modernity (Parpart, 1995). In the case of the informal sector specifically, women are seen as the targets of loan credit programs and their productive roles became the means of capitalist expansion. From a WID perspective, the informal sector is essentially public, therefore, integration into this "public life" is viewed as "gender neutral and therefore potentially beneficial to women" (Barriteau, 1995: 144).

### 3. Modernity in Marxism

A fundamental challenging of neoliberal economic "solutions" to development occurred with the emergence of Marxist and neoMarxist perspectives. Moreover, with the rise of the Latin American Dependency school, a perspective with theoretical roots in both Marxism and structuralism, came the shifting of the centre of the development debate towards the South (Hettne, 1990).<sup>11</sup> However, both Marxist and neoMarxist approaches did not question the North/South divide nor the ability of "development experts" to prescribe "development answers" (Connelly et al., 1995). In the synthesis of Marxism and feminism within the development realm, the same tendency exists. Women from the South are represented as victims of an unquestioned North/South divide and as victims of capitalism (Connelly et al., 1995; Hirshman, 1995).

The orthodox Marxist feminist approach assumes that class position ultimately accounts for the oppression of women. This oppression is understood not as the result of intentional actions of individuals, but rather, the product of political, social and economic structures connected to the spread of capitalism (Tong, 1989). In turn, orthodox Marxism focuses on women's relation to capital and modes of

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<sup>11</sup> The writings of Gunder Frank best represent the Dependency School. See specifically:

Frank, A.G., (1966). *The Development of Underdevelopment. Monthly Review*. Sept, 17-30.



production rather than women's relation to men (Maguire, 1984). A central assumption of all Marxist and socialist thought is that women's lives must be understood in a socio-economic context: materialism (Bryson, 1992)<sup>12</sup>. The Marxist posits " 'labour' as the 'essence' of being human" (Hirshman, 1995). Classical Marxism has been accused of viewing the oppression of women only through the lens of class. These critiques suggest that Marxist feminism cannot explain the persistent and widespread male oppression of women as women; women do not labour only for capital but also work directly for men (Maguire, 1984: 32).

Socialist feminism emerged out of the concurrent critique of class bias inherent to classical Marxism and the biological determinism of radical feminism (Maguire, 1984). The focus of socialist feminism is not specifically on women but on the domain of gender relations and the social constructions of these relations (Young, 1992). In development, the Gender and Development approach (GAD), emerged from similar critiques and paralleled a socialist feminist analysis. As WID focused on providing women access to participation in male-biased societal structures, GAD

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<sup>12</sup> Materialism is used in accordance with Kuhn and Wolpe's (1977: 7) loose definition:

The materialist problematic is based on a conception of human society as defined specifically by its productivity: primarily of the means of subsistence and of value through the transformation of nature through work. United with this is a conceptualization of history as the site of the social relations of production and reproduction (7).

questioned the basis of these structures (Rathgeber, 1995). GAD assumes that gender divisions are not fixed by biology, but are grounded in the social conditions of production, reproduction, culture, religion and ideology (Maguire, 1984). In turn, it is the social constructions of gender which become the target of planning and policy. However, it has been argued that social "reconstructions" do not transfer easily into planning and practice (Maguire, 1984; Moser, 1993 as cited in Parpart and Marchand, 1995).

In the informal sector literature, socialist feminist analysis was a central motivation for a focus on the relationship of reproduction to production in this sector (see for example Babb, 1986;1989; Bunster and Chaney, 1985). This focus introduced the notion that reproductive activities were often made productive. The selling of goods in the market, for example, is often an extension of reproductive tasks. This assumption, regardless of its limitations, supported the important idea that women's and men's participation in this sector may be motivated by different factors.

The writings of women of the South, as represented in the DAWN group, reacted against the silencing caused by the domination of western women's voices and experiences in gender and development theory.<sup>13</sup> These writings have

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<sup>13</sup> The DAWN approach is best represented by the much cited book:

Sen, Gita and Caren Grown, (1987), Development, Crisis

motivated a focus on poverty, North/South divisions and global economic inequities within the GAD approach (Parpart, 1995). By maintaining that the oppression of women is holistic and integrative, socialist feminists have had little disagreement with including the dynamics of racism and "underdevelopment" into a socialist analysis. In reality, however, the GAD approach has been less successful in integrating the voices of women from the South into the theory which discusses their experiences (Rathgeber, 1995). In writings emanating in both the North and the South, the "voices" of women of the South are often presented as the "voice" of a homogenous, unified woman (Hirshman, 1995).

### 3. The Limitations of Marxist and Liberal Approaches

Issues of difference are critical to the analysis of informal labour. Eudine Barriteau suggests that female entrepreneurs (women who own their own means of production in the formal sector) in Barbados pose theoretical problems to both socialist and feminist analysis as they do not fit the stereotypical representation of women of the South. Liberal feminists view them as already integrated in the productive sphere. Social feminists, see them as a privileged group requiring little assistance. Thus, both positions, argues Barriteau, imply that these women are largely excluded from gender discrimination. However, the

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and Alternative Visions. New York: Monthly Review Press.

reality is that these women meet several instances of discrimination based on their gender (1995).

This point is applicable to the case of microentrepreneurs (women who own their means of production in the informal sector). There is a need to acknowledge how the female microentrepreneur is both "subject to and resisting different kinds of subordination" (Barriteau, 1995). In the informal sector there can be no assumptions of privilege or victimization as the context of discrimination may be continuously re-positioned. A postmodern perspective argues for locally, contingent and discursive grounded analyses. Thus, it may hold promise for conceptualizing how essentialist and universalist representations of subordination, be they Marxist, socialist or liberal, limit our understanding of the dynamics of oppression of women in the informal sector, of their oppressors, and of the women themselves.

## II. BEYOND MODERNITY AND EQUALITY: POSTMODERN CHALLENGES

Postmodernism has confronted liberal, Marxist and socialist feminist approaches to development in very profound ways. However, the union/disunion of postmodernism, feminism and development is an uneasy one. The discussion of the theoretical marriage inevitably leads to an examination of the fragmented postmodern self. A subject who in the "postmodern moment" encompasses several interactive and

changing subject positions. However, the discursive subject "woman" is a serious threat to current feminist theory, it crosses the "fine line between diversity and fragmentation" (Goetz, 1991: 146). Moreover, Kate Soper (1991) argues that it is only as subjects that women can make sense of the structures that oppress them. Whereas feminist theory attempts to define women's reality, postmodernism pronounces the impossibility of such a task. Whereas feminist theory uses women's experience as a foundation of knowledge, postmodernism pronounces the death of the universal subject "woman".

In this interaction two issues appear as crucial to the advancement of the thinking on women in the informal sector: (1) does the decentred postmodern subject invite political paralysis, and, (2) what are the dynamics of fragmented, interactive subject positions? Critics of postmodernism have contested that postmodernism's link to practical development action is problematic (Udayagiri, 1995), thus, an examination of the emancipatory potential of this discourse is also crucial.

The language of gender and development will also be briefly discussed. The aim of this discussion is to illustrate the dichotomous framing of much of the analysis of women of the South, and in turn, to evidence some of the "emancipatory potential" of postmodernist deconstruction in challenging these conceptualizations.

### 1. The Death of the Subject

Although postmodernism is not a unified discourse, all postmodernists share the rejection of a concept of self or subjectivity which is not assumed to be produced as a result of discursive practices (Flax, 1990). In the process of deconstruction, all universal definitions are criticized and all essentialisms are targeted. Thus, one of the assumptions challenged in the anti-essentialism of postmodernism is the notion that there is self identity; that there is an essential unity of self through time and space (Tong, 1980: 219). Thus, postmodernism stands against one of the central values of the Enlightenment era which holds the humanist claim that the disciplined and rational subject is the basis of all political and social organization. Moreover, postmodernism is deeply suspicious of metanarratives: those discourses which establish unquestionable truth for the stories we use to explain our world. In turn, identity should not be bound by narratives of any type, including feminism (Phelan, 1989:140).

Rather than embracing the concept of the subject as all knowing, postmodernism has used "subject positions" as the center of analysis. The self is split between its conscious and unconscious dimensions. Consequently, language and reality are variable and shifting; reality eludes language and language cannot be limited by reality (Tong, 1989: 220). The social identity of "woman" becomes governed by a set of

descriptors:

..they are drawn from the fund of interpretive possibilities available to agents in specific societies. It follows that in order to understand anyone's feminine or masculine identity, it does not suffice to study biology or psychology. Instead, one must study the historically specific social practices through which cultural descriptions of gender are produced and circulated (Fraser, 1990: 83).

As Fraser suggests, social identities are discursive and complex. They may shift according to historically specific locations, practices and affiliations; "one is not always a woman in the same degree" (Fraser, 1990: 84). However, while the discursive nature of social identities is easily sanctioned, how this discursiveness is played out in social contexts demands further examination. Presumably, the identity of "woman" becomes "politically" important to adopt in certain positions-- but how is this identity limited by the physical body, by language, by location and by power?

## 2. The Subjects of Feminist Epistemology

Sandra Harding categorizes feminist epistemologies into two groups: (1) feminist empiricism and, (2) feminist standpoint theory.<sup>14</sup> Feminist empiricism argues that the sexism and androcentrism apparent in the research process is

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<sup>14</sup> Harding makes this distinction based on the assumption that feminist epistemologies are embattled- that different epistemologies serve different justificatory needs. However, both feminist empiricism and standpoint feminism are predicated on the notion that a feminist theory of knowledge is necessary. See Harding (1991) Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?

merely a result of "bad science". Consequently, such tendencies can be erased by a stricter adherence to the methodological constructs of the scientific method (Harding, 1991: 111). Feminist empiricism holds that it is not the empirical method which is flawed, but women's lack of participation in this method. Although feminist empiricism appears deeply entrenched in the enlightenment devotion to the scientific method, Harding argues that in the support of the "woman scientist", feminist empiricism steps out of modernist assumptions:

Feminist empiricism holds on to the idea that a goal of science is to produce less biased, more objective claims, but it also insists on what is overtly forbidden in empiricism - the importance of analyzing and assigning different epistemological values to the social identities of inquirers (Harding, 1990: 93).

Harding's argument is that feminist empiricism is not modernist in its assertion that the feminist researcher is not simply a neutral observer, but rather, a researcher motivated by her position as a "feminist" to conduct research which includes the differential experience of women. However, the notion that the position of the researcher is given more "value" within the confines of the scientific method is debatable. While women are able to research feminist issues, subjectivity is still demarcated as "bad science".

Conversely, standpoint feminists use the experience of women as the basis of epistemology. Experiences, understood



through feminist theory, provide the starting point for a more complete theory of knowledge (Harding, 1990: 95). However, it is this tendency to essentialize women's experience that has been susceptible to the same type of criticisms as postmodernism makes against philosophy (Nicholson, 1990). Postmodernism holds that "experience is not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain" (Scott, 1992: 38). Moreover, postmodernism attacks the notion that even the subject's knowledge claims about her own experience cannot be bound to a narrative which claims truth and legitimacy for all.

Sandra Harding's main contention is that there is a fluidity in the boundaries between modernist and postmodernist ideals, she claims that even feminist postmodernism stands "with one foot in modernity". Arguments used to illustrate the "postmodernity" of feminist empiricism are used as attacks on postmodernism rather than attacks of empiricism. Thus, one could assert that what Harding seems to be suggesting is that the "feminism" in feminist epistemology is the proper context of the discussion of the subject. In the standpoint feminist analysis of the subject, one can capture the fragmented subject that postmodernism claims to be its own.

In her contention that Enlightenment ideals permeate all of feminist thought, Harding indirectly purports that feminists can never be "true" anti-Enlightenment

postmodernists. Nonetheless, while swimming in the waters between postmodernity and modernity, Harding illustrates not only the "modernity" of all feminism but the essential "postmodernity" as well. In viewing the subject of research, standpoint feminism has rejected positivist, value free methodology. Neutrality and objectivity are replaced by what Maria Mies labels "conscious partiality":

Conscious partiality is different from mere subjectivism or simple empathy. On the basis of a limited identification it creates a critical and dialectical distance between the researcher and his 'objects'. It enables the corrections of distortions on both sides and widens the consciousness of both, the researcher and the "researched" (Mies, 1983: 123).

Thus, feminists have joined in the postmodern project of correcting the distortions of metanarratives, objectivity and universals. However, while the feminist attack may not be strictly defined as ahistorical and normative, it "does tacitly presuppose some commonly held but unwarranted and essentialist notions about the nature of human beings" (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990: 27).

Despite many advances towards an "alternative" gender and development theory and practice, both WID and GAD remain entrenched in a modernist view of development and of women of the South. In examining the dynamics of the production of knowledge about gender and development, several postmodern critiques have revealed the universal representation of women from the South as "victims" (see for example Mohanty,

1991; Parpart, 1993). In fact, progressive writings from women of the South have also been targeted in this critique. Hirshman (1995) argues that Sen and Grown's (1987) articulation of the DAWN approach dichotomizes the experience of women from the South:

..Sen and Grown tend to reduce both the complexity of the development process and women's experience in it by reducing it to the universal category of either labour, such as the procurement of food - fuel -water or gender oppression, symbolized by exclusion, cliterodectomy, restricted mobility, sexual violence and so forth. Consequently, Sen and Grown's "alternative visions" remain mired in androcentric Western thinking and fail to provide a genuine alternative to mainstream development (53).

Hirshman reacts against the privileging of poor women's lives as the point of knowledge formation. These subjects, she argues, reify the importance of the production paradigm and neglect experiences outside of these relations.

Postmodern thought has contested the primacy of materialism in feminism. This contention has taken many forms. It has been characterized by an "incredulity" towards the metanarrative of materialism. Further, it has triggered a focus not merely on the materiality of "things" but on the materiality of language (Barret, 1992). Predictably, the displacing of the centrality of materialism has met with much critique in development circles, particularly in Marxist circles. Frederic Jameson, a prominent writer on the union of Marxism and postmodernism, argues that class and modes of production should remain central in any theory

devoted to radical social change and transformation (as cited in Slater, 1992). In this sense, materialist conceptualizations aid in the ability to recognize and analyze the totalizing affects of global restructuring (Nzomo, 1995).

Rosemary Henessey argues for a postmodern materialist feminist analysis which "aims to disrupt the complicity of western knowledges in the reproduction of exploitation [and which] means that we have to confront the very material effects of the theoretical discourses we work through" (Hennessey, 1993: 66). Mitu Hirshman contends that we should question the centrality of the sexual division of labour in the feminist analysis of (and in) the South (Hirshman, 1995). In assessing the "applicability" of postmodernism to the informal sector discourse, there is a need to retain a sense of material positioning. Nonetheless, in the quest for the "improvement of the human condition" we should be particularly careful that we do not deploy concepts of materialism - such as the sexual division of labour - uncritically (Hirshman, 1995). Women's material condition is essential, however, materialist discourses owe much to androcentric and Eurocentric Enlightenment thinking.

### 3. The Postmodern Feminist Subject

The rally cry of feminism has always been the "personal is political". Implicit in this cry has been the assumption

that the subject is a necessary political agent; that personal experience is the focus of analysis for political action. Postmodern feminists have challenged this notion on several grounds. Judith Butler, in her use of a Foucaultian critique of the subject, argues that it is not the subject that is dead but merely certain versions of the subject:

To take the construction of the subject as a political problematic is not the same as doing away with the subject; to deconstruct the subject is not to negate or throw away the concept; on the contrary, deconstruction implies only that we suspend all commitments to that to which the term, 'the subject', refers, and that we consider the linguistic functions it serves in the consolidation and concealment of authority (Butler, 1992: 15).

In the challenge to universal definitions of woman, postmodern feminists hold that identity should not be a place of exclusion but rather a site of plural significations. It is this constant conflict within identity which becomes the site of political action. From this critical standpoint, feminists can judge the masculine-dominated world "as false precisely because it pretends to be 'whole' " (Cornell, 1991: 3). Thus, as argued by Butler, the subject is not dead but its "wholeness" is.

Like Butler, Joan Scott advocates a re-inscription of the subject. Traditional historical discourse, argues Scott, sees knowledge as apart from the speaker -- universal and accessible to all. Experience is grounded in the autonomy of the speaker, authority is given to the subject of knowledge in the identity of "researcher" or "historian".

However, feminist historians have made history "feminist" in their use of experience as a foundational concept; women's experience is given indisputable authority. The critical issue for Scott is how to write about identity without essentializing it. Her proposed solution is to envision the subject as a discursive entity, but similar to Butler's argument, a discursive subject with political agency:

Subjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts among discursive systems, contradictions within any one of them, multiple meanings possible for the concepts they deploy. And subjects have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them (Scott, 1992: 34).

The central basis of Scott's analysis of experience is the relationship between language and history. For her, "experience is a subject's history" and "language is the site of history's enactment" (Scott, 1992: 34). Accordingly, Scott's analysis of experience is grounded in the analysis of language as she views the two as inseparable. However, while Scott's argument that experience is always a contested domain points to a politics in the construction and linguistic usage of term, it is difficult to transfer her analysis beyond this domain. Whereas it is true that our understanding of woman cannot be separated from the words and symbols which name and represent us; "the letter is Her-story, and Her-story is the letter" (Cornell, 1991: 3), we also need to understand that which is unwritten. As

suggested by Ann Marie Goetz "the reduction of world to text--of life-- to language-- allows us to forget that, for feminists, some accounts are more vitally true than others" (Goetz, 1991: 149).

The emphasis of Scott's analysis is "imposed" agency, that is, action which is conferred upon individuals due to notions of identity which are not made or controlled by the individual. Kathleen Canning suggests that this type of analysis may obscure or ignore how individual "desire" motivates change and revolution:

Key, however, in analyzing how discourses change, how subjects contest power in its discursive form, and how their desires and discontents transform or explode discursive systems is the concept of agency. How can discourses figure as anything but fixed hegemonic systems without the interventions of agents who render them contingent and permeable? (Canning, 1994: 377).

Canning supports the use of the notion of the body as a "historically contingent site of subjectivity". She notes that discourses encompass not only the domain in which subjectivities emerge, but "also actually create the conditions for this transformation in very concrete ways" (Canning, 1994: 396). Essentially, Canning suggests that women's embodied experiences can be used as a means to contest discourses:

[T]he body, if understood as a complex site of inscription and of subjectivity/resistance, offers an interesting and intricate way of retheorizing agency. Indeed, the notions of bodily inscription and reinscription seem to defy both the illusion of autonomous agency/subjectivity and the vision of discourse as singularly determinant of subjects

and their experiences (Canning, 1994: 397).

However, where does Canning's interesting retheorizing of agency leave us? Clearly, Canning offers important arguments against the abandonment of the subject. She suggests that discourse may not merely be a reflection of experience (or even a neglect of it), but rather, it can serve to intrude upon experience and change it in very concrete ways. Thus, the body is not an unreconciled site of experience; experience is embodied. While Canning criticizes Scott for her "circular path" in defining experience, Canning herself is subject to the same criticism. While subjects are not autonomous agents nor does discourse unequivocally represent experience, Canning's assertion of the complexity of experience offers little analysis of how this complexity is regulated. In her effort to defy the argument that notions of subjectivity are always imposed, Canning can only say they are sometimes imposed - why or when the imposition takes place is not discussed in her analysis. Nonetheless, the importance of Canning's analysis is her insistence on the belief that notions of subjectivity are embodied, in turn, the postmodern feminist subject is always "sexed".

Rosi Braidotti (1992) parallels Canning's emphasis on the embodiment of the subject as the starting ground for a redefinition of female subjectivity. Upholding the notion of multifaceted subjectivity, Braidotti maintains that one can



speak as a woman, although the subject "woman" does not have a "monolithic essence". Braidotti makes an important distinction between identity and subjectivity. The identity of "woman" should be used as a self-affirming political force:

It is an act of legitimation whereby the 'she-self' blends her ontological desire to be with the conscious willed becoming of a collective political movement. This distinction between the will and desire marks a separation of registers, of levels of experience, which must be underlined and never confused. The distinction between identity and subjectivity is to be related to that between will and desire (Braidotti, 1992: 186).

Thus, identity and subjectivity can be viewed as different moments in the process of defining subject position. There exists the ontological desire to posit oneself as a sexed being (identity); however, in the task to define new forms of female subjectivity, one must rethink the foundations of the "will to know" (subjectivity). Braidotti emphasizes "women's desire to become, not a specific model for their becoming" ; the female feminist subject is the intersection of subjective desire with the will for social transformation (1992: 188).

In her analysis Braidotti moves towards a gendered universal, that is, she maintains that women must politically position themselves as a collective subject. Such an understanding holds much promise for a "politics of subject positions". A gendered universal argues for the "complex intersecting of never ending levels of differing of

self from other and self from self", yet at the same time, "the indestructible unity of the human as an embodied self structurally linked to the other" (Braidotti, 1992: 189). Thus, the positing of a universal parallels Braidotti's notion that subject positioning is in fact a process. One must first accept that identity is complex, multilayered and most importantly not "owned", and then use this foundation to affirm the commonality that "each woman is the woman of all woman" (Braidotti, 1992: 190).

#### 4. The 'subject' in the Difference Debates

Current critiques of difference<sup>15</sup>, both in and out of postmodern discourse, challenge the underlying premise of early feminist theory, a premise which suggests that difference should be ignored in favour of a focus on the common bond of "gender subordination" existing between women (King, 1992; hooks, 1981; Collins, 1992; Sen and Grown, 1987; Moraga, 1992; Harding 1992; Lerner, 1992). Jagger and Rothenberg (1992), for example, writing from a Socialist feminist perspective, suggested that women's oppression can be viewed through what they call multiple lenses. With the

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<sup>15</sup> The label "difference theory" is used here to describe the difference debates which are occurring outside of the postmodern feminist discourse. The critiques may be internal, that is, the argument to include issues such as race in socialist feminist analysis (Jagger and Rothenberg, 1992), or the critiques may be encompassed in the emergence of theories which emphasize difference, i.e. multicultural feminism, black feminism, third world feminism.

assumption that universal generalizations about women are most certainly false, they trace the movement of theory through the viewing of one lens towards more "sophisticated and nuanced theories" which envision reality through multiple lenses. The challenge of this multiple lens construct is to establish an analysis which is interactive rather than additive, and to create a method which allows multiple differences to be addressed in an interconnected and simultaneous manner:

Specific questions about which lenses are appropriate on which occasions have now replaced general concerns about primacy at the centre of feminist theory. The one general claim of which we can be certain is that only by superimposing multiple lenses can feminists make women's subordination fully visible in its variety as well as its sameness, its conflicts as well as its commonality (Jagger and Rothenberg, 1992: 126).

Again however, while the multiple lens construct reaffirms the idea that a focus on one system of oppression is faulty, the construct does not elucidate how one is to judge the "appropriateness" of which lens for which situation. As has been illustrated in the history of feminist theory and research, particularly with reference to women in the postcolonial world, there is a strong tendency to de-emphasize important systems of oppression. Consequently, the operationalization of the multiple lens construct is of crucial importance.

At their bases, many theories of difference argue for an elaborated feminist standpoint theory (see for example

Gallin and Ferguson, 1993). The danger of this trend has been that knowledge and experience become inextricably linked; women are asked to "accept the counterintuitive claim that we should speak only of what we have directly experienced" (Harding, 1992: 178). Standpoints may also invite the separation and categorization of experience rather than the understanding of the interaction of experience.

Although the difference debates reiterate the "postmodern" themes of experience and subjectivity as integrative and multicausal, these debates differ from the postmodern approach to difference in several significant ways. Most importantly, while theories of difference claim that a difference analysis is more "true" than a theory of race, or class or gender alone, postmodernism claims that "truth" can only ever be partially known. However, this is Harding's essential criticism of postmodernism, that it assumes the Enlightenment ideal of equating truth and falsity. Postmodernism accepts that if one must stop telling the universal truth about reality, one must then also give up trying to tell less false stories of reality (Harding, 1990: 100). Similarly, what is apparently motivating both postmodernism and difference theory is the same desire: to explain women's experience in a more exhaustive way. However, while difference theorists can readily adopt this position, it is a tenuous one for postmodern feminists:

[T]he very reasoning that allows us to appreciate the attractions and importance of discourse theory and deconstruction is such as to commit the reasoner to defending certain values. Why, for example, lend ourselves to the politics of 'difference' if not in virtue of its enlightenment - what it permits in the way of releasing subjects from the confluences of imperializing discourse and the constructed identities of binary oppositions? (Soper, 1991: 124).

Soper's criticism suggests that in assessing women's differences one must ultimately return to theory to "use" the products of deconstruction. However, postmodern feminists argue that it is precisely the adherence to "feminist theory" which makes the "viewer" unable to see anything but their own ideological reflection. As suggested by Christina Crosby, "a feminism which looks to find 'women' and always finds what it is looking for is bound to be ideological--falsely universalizing and dehistoricizing--despite its appeal to history" (Crosby, 1992: 132). Crosby argues that one of the great virtues of postmodern thought, particularly in the writing of Donna Haraway, is that the subject is at first unrecognizable. Because feminist theory often treats differences as self evident, Crosby challenges us to think differently about differences:

Otherwise differences will remain as self-evident as identity once was, and just as women's studies once saw woman everywhere, the academy will recognize differences everywhere, cheerfully acknowledging that since everyone is different, everyone is the same. Such is the beauty of pluralism (Crosby, 1992:140).

Thus, while difference theory charges that postmodernism is paralysed after the process of deconstruction,

postmodernists argue that difference theory cannot even claim to see differences as theory itself will govern which differences will be seen. Thus, to see differences one must, as Gayatri Spivak proposes, "unlearn ones privilege as a loss" -- the "personal" can never remain unquestioned (Spivak, 1990). Although postmodernism is charged with a "mere functional marking" and "rhetorization of" and "speaking for" otherness (Richard, 1993: 160), it challenges the very notion that universals can speak for anyone.

The current difference debates provide a rather comfortable position of self enquiry for feminists. The tendency has been to "add on" issues such as race and sexuality when relevant, rather than to "reflect on how, when and why such categories originated and were modified over time" (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990: 33). Although postmodernism is accused of taking away women's voice at a time when women are just claiming a voice (Hartsock, 1990), likewise, it can be argued that much of feminist theory has not offered an environment where difference is anything more than rhetoric (Mohanty, 1991).

### 5. A Politics of Subject Positions?

Some feminists coming from a postmodern perspective hold that to proclaim that "differences make a difference" is itself a political act; to question the female subject is a political gesture (Nicholson, 1990; Braidotti, 1992).

However, other feminists argue that postmodernism is not easily transferable outside the realm of philosophical enquiry into a useful social criticism (Nzomo, 1995; Walby, 1991). These critics suggest that while feminist and Marxist theorists have debated the political nature of the subject, postmodernists have merely focused on the subject in language (MacDonald, E., 1991). To posit political immobility for the decentred subject, one must adhere to one of the following assumptions. First, the fragmentation of the subject must be seen as preventing feminist solidarity; fragmentation causes isolation and alienation. Or, one may argue that a fragmented subject cannot act; subject positions do not allow the subject to understand or confront the systemic roots of oppression.

The first assumption is a common critique aimed at identity politics in general. The movement towards individualism has been accused of attempting to "establish an exclusionary set of identifications which becomes a competitive hierarchy of oppression" (Briskin, 1992: 270). However, identity politics need not be an act of exclusion but may serve as an act of coalition:

Identity politics must be based, not only on identity but on appreciation for politics as the art of living together. Politics that ignores our identities, that makes them 'private', is useless; but nonnegotiable identities will enslave us whether they are imposed from within or without (Phelan, 1989: 170).

Although identity politics which reduce women to one

identity are objectionable to postmodern feminists, a politics of identity which holds identity as relational is essential. In turn, coalition politics can be used to eliminate the structures of identity which apply notions of universals and centres to marginalize and dominate peripheral identities. Ultimately, this is a project of incorporation: "To engage with difference without diminishing it, we need to insist on a commitment to inclusiveness" (Goetz, 1991: 153).

The second resistance to subject fragmentation rests on the assumption that politics requires a stable subject.

Butler, argues against such a premise:

That claim implies that a critique of the subject cannot be a politically informed critique but, rather, an act which puts into jeopardy politics as such. To require the subject means to foreclose the domain of the political, and that foreclosure, installed analytically as an essential feature of the political, enforces the boundaries of the domain of the political in such a way that enforcement is protected from political scrutiny (Butler, 1992: 4).

To accept the postmodern feminist subject as a social agent, one must accept the provisional, changing and tenuous condition of the subject. Such an approach enables a clearer understanding of feminist struggles:

Their central characteristic is an ensemble of subject positions linked through inscriptions in social relations, hitherto considered as apolitical, have become loci of conflict and antagonism and have led to political mobilization (Mouffe, 1992: 372).

Mouffe argues that the fragmented subject is not a political



obstacle, only when identity is reduced to a single descriptor is feminism disabling. However, Gayatri Spivak has tackled what she has labelled the "strategic use of essentialism". Spivak argues that although we must rhetorically take a stand against universalism and essentialism, we are connected to these concepts whether we realize it or not:

Since the moment of essentializing, universalizing, saying yes to the onto-phenomenological question, is irreducible, let us at least situate it at the moment, let us become vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it (Spivak, 1990: 11).

Spivak's "strategic use of essentialism" seems to stand in direct opposition to the postmodern attack on metanarratives and essentialism. However, Spivak does not support the abandonment of such an attack. Rather, she suggests that the deconstruction of these concepts requires an acknowledgement of their existence. In her later work Spivak abandoned the phrase as it became the "union ticket of essentialism". This later work reflects much more concern with differences between so-called essences:

They are not the same everywhere. The question of female agency is dependent upon constitutions. Constitutions are extremely historical things that are produced quite often by the dismantling of a colony or an empire, and therefore, in the constitution, the mark of the former masters is still present (Spivak as cited in Danus and Jonsson, 1993: 36).

Spivak's position is reflective of the use of postmodernism

and feminism as interrogations upon each other. As a deconstructionist, as a Marxist and as a feminist, she constantly challenges the boundaries of each approach.

## 6. Conclusions

If one examines the current writing of postmodern feminists, one may conclude that the subject is not really dead. Thus, the question is not "Is the subject dead?", but rather, "Which subject is dead?". A concept of subjectivity encompasses much of this discourse, however, it is a subjectivity which is multilayered and changing. The critique of the subject is, as Judith Butler contends, a way of "interrogating its construction as a pre-given or foundationalist premise". We must, as feminists, "consider the political consequences of keeping in their place the very premises that have tried to secure our subordination" (Butler, 1992: 19).

Despite the fact that postmodern feminism clearly denotes the death of the universal subject, the life of the decentred subject raises some unanswered questions. Most importantly, can subject positions be ranked or ordered? To accept the interaction of subject positions is not an easy task. In turn, the result may be the desire to divide and separate various positions in order to define identity. For example, to be an informal sector worker may be politically desirable in some situations but not in others. As

feminists should we be concerned that we could potentially avoid the identity of "woman"? Or possibly, that if one could quantify "woman" as a subject position, that it could become synthesized and interfaced to the degree that "being a woman" could not be understood ?

We turn now to a discussion of the language of development discourse. Postmodernism has had a profound affect on challenging the re-presentation of women of the South (see particularly Mohanty, 1991). It is in the analysis of text where postmodernist critiques reveal that universalism and essentialism - as legacies of Enlightenment thought- have controlled images of women of the South. In turn, it is in the analysis of language where we can map out how the struggle in the text mirrors the practice and policy of development.

### III. THE LANGUAGE OF GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT

An analysis of the language of gender and development is framed by two parallel trends in development discourse. The first is to unify and essentialize the experiences of women of the South into one undifferentiated "woman"; the "other". This re-presentation of women is not a simple dynamic. It is based on the complex interaction of the self presentation of women of the North as "feminist, developed and modern", of the analytic tendency to treat women as an "already coherent and constituted" group, and of the

methodological primacy given to experience as "proof" of pre-given traits (Mohanty, 1991). This process of universalisation leads to the re-presentation of women as "victims" of modernisation.

The second, and related, trend in development discourse is to define concepts along oppositional binarisms<sup>16</sup>. Often these binarisms are represented by male/female dichotomies, and perhaps less often by feminine/feminist dualisms. These binarisms include reproductive/productive, powerful/powerless and strategic/practical gender needs. The conceptual danger of dualisms is that they block perceptions of meaning outside of oppositional thinking. That is, one polar simply becomes the negation of the other. While, the polars exist; there is for example, a state of power and powerlessness, it becomes difficult to conceptualize the relations of power outside of these polars. The goal of deconstruction, is therefore, to displace dominant forms of "othering" and to liberate these terms in their "precise contradictions" and "specific structurations". (Ong, 1988: 161).

Understanding identity inscriptions within binary oppositions is most often connected with the work of Derrida. The process of deconstruction, argued Derrida, illustrates how the man/woman binarism, as an example,

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<sup>16</sup> I use the terminologies binarism, dualism and dichotomy interchangeably.

constructed women merely as the complete negation of man. In turn, Derrida supports the rejection of the system which organizes such oppositions: logocentrism (Nicholson, 1992: 61).

Within the limits of binary oppositions and the accompanied attack on logocentrism, feminists many find both sanctuary and confinement:

Because language itself is identified with oppression, resistance to oppression can only be formulated as antilanguage. We are left with no cues on "how to do things with words" in the fight against sexism (Nicholson, 1992: 58).

Escape from binarisms, although necessary, may be problematic within the current "rules" of deconstruction. The definition of woman necessarily rests on the definition of man; asking the question "what is woman?" is simply a reiteration of "what is man?" (Spivak as cited in Danus and Jonsson, 1993).

Although binary oppositions may eventually displace themselves (Spivak as cited in Danus and Jonsson, 1993), the redefinition of "woman" may not necessarily be addressed. Kate Soper argues that the examination of binarisms outside the context of an associated vocabulary of aesthetics and values is theoretically and politically paralyzing. The postmodernist argument, she claims, does not direct us beyond its own discourse:

According to this position, there are no transcendent, extra discursive qualities or experiences to which we can appeal as the grounds for the talk of values and the discrimination it

offers, since these refer us only to what discourse itself constructs (Soper, 1991: 121).

In both the use and deconstruction of binary analytics the important question is, as suggested by Spivak, -- can the subaltern speak? (Spivak, 1990). Drucilla Cornell argues that the subjection of women is not insoluble:

Nor is feminine as written and rewritten within the continual shifting of a "reality" presented in metaphor; it is not reducible to the subversion of the unrepresentable. The rewriting of the feminine can, in other words, be transformative, not merely disruptive (Cornell, 1991: 3).

Thus, in re-presenting women of the South as the "other", it "becomes politically necessary to trace the operations of that construction and erasure" (Butler, 1992: 14). However, the simple act of making the other "visible" does not ensure that voices from the margins are heard or that we are meaningfully reconstructing the "other" (Chow, 1992; Butler, 1992). It then becomes apparent that escape from binarisms will not be found in the mere process of deconstruction.

In her discussion of "third world feminism", Chandra Mohanty suggests that the intellectual and political construction of feminism from a third world perspective demands attention to two simultaneous projects: one of deconstruction and one of construction. The first involves the internal critiques of western hegemonic discourse; a deconstruction of the mainstream view. The second is the creation of historically, geographically, culturally grounded feminism (Mohanty, 1991: 51). As suggested by

Mohanty, these projects, although in apparent opposition to each other, must be pursued simultaneously in order for a feminist "subject" to emerge from the ashes of deconstruction.

In the informal sector literature on women, there are several binarisms which have served to frame women of the South as "not man", as "not developed", as "not modern" and as "not productive". A deconstruction of these terms is not solely a question of language. These binarisms have formed the basis of both research and planning. The practical/strategic needs dualism, for example, has been used to motivate a focus on meeting women's basic needs in the informal sector. This "practical gender need" is given primacy over understanding how informal sector involvement itself may support women's subordinate position in the labour market. Thus, the following analyses of various dualisms will assess both the conceptual and the policy implications of the language of development.

### 1. Reproduction, Production and the Sexual Division of Labour

The reproductive/productive dichotomy is a terminology which is universally applied to the theorizing on women's work. Reproduction refers to several levels of women's participation in society: as biological reproducers of children, as social reproducers of labour power, and more

generally as reproducers of society itself (Babb, 1986: 54). Juxtaposing this role, in definition, is the productive role. Clearly, in the analysis of defining women's productive roles lies the issue of defining how productivity has been defined for men's labour. Marxist analysis classified productive work as any work which provided an exchange value. Some authors refer to the productive as employment in general, others refer to wage or salaried labour only, and still others focus solely on manufacturing employment (as cited in Scott, 1986: 653).

Early Marxist analysis highlighted the importance of reproductive labour to the process of capitalist accumulation, class relations and waged labour. The ensuing "domestic labour debate" toyed with the question as to whether women's reproductive labour could produce exchange value to capital, and similarly, whether women's entrance into wage labour would create emancipation.<sup>17</sup> In theorizing women's reproductive role, Marxist feminists are forced to analyze the interaction of capitalism and patriarchy. While women are seen as affected by both systems of oppression,

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<sup>17</sup> The "domestic labour debate" refers to a series of articles which emerged in the 1970s as a criticism to the productive focus of earlier Marxist analysis. For a review of the involved issues see:

Smith, Paul, (1978), "Domestic Labour and Marx's Theory of Value", in Annette Kuhn and AnnMarie Wolpe, (eds), Feminism and Materialism. London: Routledge.

For a more recent analysis of this debate see:

Armstrong, Pat and Hugh Armstrong (1983), "Beyond Sexless Class and Classless Sex: Towards Feminist Marxism", Studies in Political Economy, No. 10, Winter.



the interaction of these systems is a point of contention (Hartmann, 1981; MacIntosh, 1981; Maguire, 1984). Writings which view patriarchy and capitalism as independent analytical concepts operating in distinct social spheres, are problematic in that patriarchal relations are designated to the realm of reproduction and capitalist relations to the realm of production (Ruchwarger, 1989: 110; Walby, 1989; Gallin and Ferguson, 1991).

The conceptual analysis of women's productive or waged work has triggered a reanalysis of the changing relationship between waged work and other forms of work (such as the informal sector), where "productivity" is less easily measured and which apparently lie outside the capitalist relations of production (Redclift, 1985). In this reanalysis, the central issue is not one of broadening the concept of productivity. Such a movement would merely serve as a labelling process with no corresponding implications to the realm of structural change in the valuation of women's productive labour. At issue is how the current differentiation between productive and nonproductive is reflective of unequal wage levels, working conditions, job security and work valuation:

It is thus necessary, regarding the concept of the productivity of labour, to reject its narrow definition and to show that labour can only be productive in the sense of producing surplus value as long as it can tap, extract, exploit, and appropriate labour which is spent in the production of life, or subsistence production which is largely nonwage labour mainly done by

women (Mies, 1986: 47).

The suggestion of Mies is that current definitions of productive employment are based on male biased conceptions of production; conceptions which demand that surplus be extracted before any economic "value" is attributed. Furthermore, the type of productive labour which is present in the current global structure is indicative of an exploitation of many types of cheap labour, among them women's so-called reproductive labour.

In the identification of that which is productive as that which is valued, both economically and socially, women's subordination is causally linked to women's exclusion from production. In turn, such a premise suggests that the empowerment of women will depend on women's integration into the productive sphere. However, such reasoning does little to challenge the existing devaluation of women's labour. Instead, it calls for women's integration into a productive structure which is based on the attributes of men: their non-involvement in "reproduction" and their involvement in "production" (Stolcke, 1981: 46).

Suspiciously absent from the discourse is a thorough and ongoing analysis of the role of women as consumers in a productive economy (Ahooja-Patel, 1993). The active incorporation of women as a cheap subordinate labour source is supported by the consumption of these goods. In the words of Maria Mies (1986: 120), "it is not enough that these

commodities have to be produced as cheaply as possible, they also have to be sold". Thus, as reproduction and production are conveniently divided, so too are production and consumption.

In her analysis of the progressive writings of DAWN, Mitu Hirshman (1995) contends that in giving analytic primacy to a concept of women's labour, these writings are subject to charges of "essentialism, foundationalism and ethnocentrism". Women's labour as it is defined by the sexual division of labour becomes the "essence" of women's lives and experiences. In turn, other experiences which fall outside this labour analytic become absent from the investigation of women's subordination. Essentially, Hirshman debates the "truth" of imposing a priori analytical concepts, such as the sexual division of labour, which merely serve to treat women themselves as analytic categories.

In the Marxian reanalysis to widen concepts of production and reproduction there is an absence of the fundamental questioning of the primacy of this analytic. The prevalence of the productive/reproductive binary analytic in gender and development thought supports the notion that women can only be emancipated through the use of "Western economic rationality" (Udayagiri, 1995). Sylvia Walby, however, argues that while there are forms of modernist discourses which totalize and reduce the

complexity of social interaction, so too exist more nuanced theories of the sexual division of labour which allow for a more complex viewing of the world (Walby, 1992). Despite these movements towards a less gender biased conception of production, the concepts owe to a Marxist history which privileges the productivist paradigm and which can never be fundamentally escaped (Hirshman, 1995).

The sexual division of labour analytic may have particular implications for the examination of women's informal sector labour. As discussed previously, women's informal labour often reflects an "extension" of reproductive tasks. However, in the polarization of reproduction and production, it becomes theoretically difficult to account for this apparent "extension". If reproduction is defined as the negation of production, they cannot be "one". The goal of the analysis then becomes to position the point of definition; when does reproduction becomes production? However, for women of the informal sector, the definition of production owes to an androcentric history which may not reflect the complexity of their experience. In turn, the question as to when reproduction becomes productive becomes less relevant. More important is the examination of how informal labour interrogates the very meaning of these concepts.

## 2. Practical and Strategic Gender Needs

The strategic/practical differentiation pervades gender and development theory and practice<sup>18</sup>. Practical gender needs are those needs which are derived from the tangible day-to-day conditions women experience in their position in the sexual division of labour and are based on their interest in survival. Planning for practical gender needs requires a focus on the domestic arena, on income earning activities and on the provision of housing and basic services.

Strategic interests are assessed through the analysis of women's subordination to men on a more structural basis. According to a strategic analysis, a more equal and just organization of society would require a restructuring of the relationships between men and women. Strategic gender interests are deemed as "feminist" because these interests are frequently considered by feminists to be women's "real" interests (Molyneux, 1985: 233). Strategic policy and practice focuses on consciousness raising through bottom-up,

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<sup>18</sup> The strategic /practical differentiation first appeared in Maxine Molyneux's writing on the emancipation of women in post revolutionary Nicaragua (Molyneux, 1985). In this work, she used the three fold conceptualization of: (1) women's interests, (2) strategic gender interests, and (3) practical gender interests. This conceptualization was adapted by Moser(1989) into the practical/strategic differentiation. Kate Young (1988) also adapted the distinction and compared it to her own analytical division: women's condition and women's position. Young preferred gender 'needs' strategic gender 'interests'. However, despite subtle variations in language, the essential meaning remains constant in this distinction.

grassroots organizing (Moser, 1989: 1803).

A necessary result of the dividing of practical and strategic gender needs, has been the hierarchical ordering of practical needs over strategic needs. That is, women's basic need for survival has been the impetus of planning. While this hierarchy appears logical, it raises important the important question as to whether the meeting of practical needs will necessarily lead to the meeting of strategic needs?

The greater flaw of the practical/strategic division is that the analysis of gender subordination, which forms the focus of analysis at the strategic level, remains absent from analysis at the practical level. The contention that strategic gender needs are "feminist" is a contentious one. The feminist/not feminist distinction invites further division; namely the separation of feminist theory from development theory. Practical gender needs become the domain of development planners, strategic gender needs become the domain of feminists.

The feminist/not feminist division may also have roots in the interaction of Northern and Southern feminism. Accusations of "western white middle class" bias have long been directed the feminist movement of the North. One must question whether labelling strategic gender interests as "feminist" dissociates the feminist movement from the issues of economic and racial oppression. While development

planners have absolved themselves from feminist issues, some WID practitioners have likewise absolved themselves from "larger" development issues by downplaying the imposition of a mainstream modernization development paradigm on the South. Feminist research is rife with criticism of approaches which emphasize the productive role of women, but it has not thoroughly evaluated the discourse nor the structural factors which gives importance to this role (Elson, 1987).

The more profound implication of the feminine/feminist distinction is that it invites a definition of "real feminism". The feminist/feminine dichotomy has been used to judge the successes and failures of social movements. It is not just a construct imposed by Western feminists, women of the South use it themselves. At times, the dichotomy can be a source of empowerment as it allows women to make a "straight forward" statement about their feminist actions (Marchand, 1995). Again however, it is when the practical/strategic gender needs dichotomy stands as an unquestioned dualism that it is most problematic. Moreover, it is when social movements are defined as feminine or as feminist that the gender and development enterprise becomes the project of a few.

The feminine/feminist dualism supports the "victim" characterization of women of the South. As many of the informal sector projects have focused on meeting women's so-

called basic needs (Moser, 1989), the "patients" of these policies become "victims" waiting to be "modernized" by Northern technical assistance (Parpart, 1995). This assumption reifies a backward/modern relationship between the informal and formal sectors. If the goal of informal sector projects become solely the meeting of practical gender needs, then it is the productive role of women which is given precedence. In turn, emancipation and empowerment become defined by economics. Similarly, informal sector involvement becomes characterized as "backward" and "undeveloped" behaviour.

### 3. Power and Powerlessness

Power and powerlessness have always been central concepts for reflection in feminist theory. There is, however, an uneasy state of paradox in this reflection. While on the one hand feminism focuses on how women are powerless, on the other hand, it struggles to confirm the essential power of women. Historically however, women are more often connected to an image of powerlessness. In this "oppressed group model", women appear as "universally downtrodden, demeaned and infantilized" by patriarchy (Elshtain, 1992: 110). To agree with this model is to affirm that the "difference" of woman is a mark of inequality, as "equality" is a relationship which occurs only among the powerful when compared to the unequal powerless class



(Elshtain, 1992: 123). This conception of power ultimately sends one on a circular path towards an understanding of power and is reminiscent of liberal notions of equality and difference.

Both liberal and Marxist political theories see power as something which an individual does or does not have. For liberals, power is held by the state over its subjects. For Marxists, power is held by one class over another. However, both perspectives see power in a materialist analysis; power is manifested in the control and regulation of politico-economic relations (Gatens, 1992: 124). In turn, this analysis conceives of women's powerlessness as a result of her alienation from the realm of politico-economic relations. Any power associated with women is connected to her involvement in the private sphere. Complementary forms of power are attributed to the sexes: males have formal power and females have informal power (Elshtain, 1992: 114).

When power and powerlessness are diametrically opposed, empowerment is often conceptualized as "taking power". In his alternate analysis of power, Michel Foucault reacted against accounts of power which were drawn as totalistic and exist only to forbid and prohibit (Elshtain, 1992: 123). Instead, he concentrates on power as set of relations framed by the affects of power-body connections on discourses and

practices (Gatens, 1992)<sup>19</sup>. Power constituted outside of humanist limitations considers the ways in which power constructs particular subjects:

..One could argue that gender is a material effect of the way in which power takes hold of the body rather than an ideological effect of the way power 'conditions' the mind (Gatens, 1992: 127).

To offer a more useful analysis of empowerment, feminist analysis needs to put the subject's experiences at the center of analysis, to question what power feels like from the inside and to imagine possibilities for resistance (Deveaux, 1994: 223).

The main advantage of a centred conception of power is that power can be easily identified and located. Sylvia Walby (1992: 48) argues that to fragment power is to shift "structure into discourse", and in turn, to deny "causality and macro-social concepts". In the history of the development enterprise, the identification of women of the South as "powerless" has led to gender issues being placed on the development agenda. Also, it tells the real story of a condition of poverty. The decentred and discursive subject of postmodernism, argues Mridula Udayagiri, may be powerless

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<sup>19</sup> The relevance of a Foucaultian analysis of power to feminist theory is a contested topic. Monique Deveaux (1994) provides a review of the influence of Foucault's theory of power. Here she argues that while feminists can learn a great deal from Foucault, that feminism itself has the tools to envision an alternate vision of empowerment. For Deveaux, Foucault's analysis is not without omissions and problems. See Harstock (1990) in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Linda Nicholson, ed., for an alternate reading of Foucault.

to the hegemonizing affects of capitalist structures. "How can we build coalitions", she queries, "unless we construct some universalizing experiences that bond us together" (1995: 169).

These critiques, although serious and important, do concentrate on the material constitution of power. Power, however, permeates society and does not solely exist in a power/powerless economic dualism. Above all, it is the experience of powerlessness that is most relevant (Deveaux, 1994). Could power not be local, fragmented and contextual, just as subjectivity may be? A preoccupation with economic models in the development discourse has reified the notion that power is found in the public sphere and productive spheres, and in turn, is essentially a male trait that must be "taken" through "equality".

In the tendency to define women as homogenous, unified, powerless groups, a movement from powerlessness to power is constituted as a simple inversion of what exists. This constitution, argues Chandra Mohanty, robs women of the South of political agency as it "colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different women in social class and ethnic frameworks" (1991: 72). Thus, in the examination of the informal sector analyses we must seriously question the extent to which informal sector involvement gets defined as "powerless" due to the fact that it lies outside of traditionally "powerful" sites. Is

difference a mark of inequality? Is power an operational construct? The answers to these questions are essential to locating the sites of power and powerlessness in the informal sector.

### CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has provided an introduction to several themes which will be addressed throughout this analysis. In this way, it has largely focused on the critiques of present analyses rather than the formulation of an "alternative" postmodern perspective. Postmodernism is a complex and expansive body of literature. The process of summation necessarily limits its variability. It is evident, however, that a postmodernist discourse does not inherently lead to political nihilism. While the place of materialism, of power and of subjectivity continue to be ongoing debates, there is a place for these central concepts in the discourse.

In the following chapters it will be necessary to move the postmodern analysis beyond the difference debates. Postmodernity sits quite comfortably within a discussion of difference. It provides an important refuge for feminists seeking an analysis of difference. However, how difference is discussed within a notion of discursive subjectivities demands attention. In conceiving subjectivities which do not render us as victims or colonizers, it is necessary to rethink the concepts of voice and experience.

The analysis of the language of development illustrated the important implications of the re-presentation of women of the South as the "other" to an analysis of the informal sector. Similarly, this examination revealed how the use of oppositional dichotomies predict the questions which will be posed. The essential problem in the use of these dualisms is that the answers are also controlled. In turn, it becomes theoretically problematic to envision discursiveness, complexity and specificity within these constrained conceptualizations. The next chapter will carry these issues to the interrogation of the informal/formal sector dichotomy.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE CONCEPT OF THE INFORMAL SECTOR

While the inception of the term "informal sector" reflected a necessity to understand the difference between the formal and informal sectors, researchers disagree as to which differences are critical and why. Neoliberal theorists focus on both enterprise type (specifically, the microenterprise), and on the absence of legal and bureaucratic structures in the informal sector. In this analysis, the informal sector is viewed as a small scale free market. Marxist analyses consider labour relations as the key defining features. From a Marxist perspective, informal labour functions to lessen the costs of formal labour, and in turn, is fundamentally exploitative. At the base of all analyses of informality, however, is the assumption that difference is a mark of inferiority. The informal sector, as the "other" in the dual economy, is less productive, less "developed", and in turn, less "modern" than the formal sector.

This chapter begins with an exploration of the definitional and theoretical debates about the informal sector. The aim is not to seek an end to these debates, rather, it is the debates themselves which are the point of analysis. To meet this aim, the chapter will map out how various perspectives on the informal sector in Latin America define and use the concept of "informality" within the limitations of the informal/formal sector dichotomy.

A second, and more central, focus of this chapter is an examination of the impact of feminist theory on the research and policy of the informal sector. For much of the history of the discourse, the informal sector was considered to be largely a male sector (Scott, 1991; Feldman, 1991), in turn, the experience of women remained invisible to statistics and analysis. The advent of feminist analyses challenged this invisibility. Liberal feminists, for example, advanced the notion that women could also be "powerful entrepreneurs" (Buvinic and Berger, 1990). Somewhat conversely, feminist analyses drawing on Marxist principles suggested that like men, women in the informal sector were "victims" of the exploitation of the formal sector. Unlike most men, however, they were the "poorest of the poor" and rarely rose above the survival level (Moser, 1981).

As evidenced in the previous chapter, postmodern critiques have illustrated that gender and development analyses have been plagued by western, economic rationalist thinking. This legacy has served to universalize and essentialize women of the South by positioning them as a homogenous group who seek "equality". The final project of this chapter is to again employ a postmodern analysis to assess how these same modernist tendencies interplay in the informal/formal dichotomy. A postmodern analysis marks a meaningful exchange with the differences between men's and women's experiences of informal sector employment. So too,

does it mark an interrogation of the differences between women themselves.

Gender and development thought has continuously argued that women's experiences are ignored in most of the informal sector models (see particularly Feldman, 1991). However, the process of making women "visible" subjects of inquiry does not necessarily create women as "different" subject of inquiry. Nor, does it guarantee women will be subjects at all. Further, the process of "visibilisation" does not ensure a changed discourse. Thus, there is a need to integrate experience and voice in the analysis of the informal sector. This, however, must be done in "new" ways which draw on postmodern ideas of the contingent subject.

## I. WHAT IS THE INFORMAL SECTOR? : The Evolution of the Debate

### 1. Sources of Conflict

The process of defining the informal sector has taken several paths. Researchers have been concerned with various aspects of the informal sector including the relationship of the informal sector to the formal sector, its relationship to developing countries and its connection to the state. In many ways, these conceptualizations are in "competition" (Portes and Schauffler, 1993). Lisa Peattie argues that the adoption of the term "informal sector" was in response to the needs of many different groups with varying purposes -



development planners, economists, populists. She suggests that the term may be likened more to a banner than to an adequate tool of analysis (1987: 857).

Quite clearly, this banner analysis has some relevance. The definition changes drastically according to the needs of the analysis. For example, from a sociological perspective, the informal sector can refer to a social stratum (Portes, 1983)<sup>20</sup>. The informal sector encompasses the most deprived sectors of the population, primarily in urban areas, and thus, can denote a "type" of individual such as the "working poor", or a "type" of group such as the "lower or popular class". From an economic perspective, the informal sector can refer to the size of a business operation. In this perspective, the informal sector describes those businesses which are small, which exist outside legal business structures and which employ few workers (Bonilla, 1990). In this analysis, informality denotes an enterprise type.

As argued by Portes and Sassen-Koob (1987), the definitional debate over the informal sector is conflicted largely because of these somewhat opposing paths. Each perspective asks certain questions about the nature of the

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<sup>20</sup> In her 1977 review, Chilean sociologist Dagmar Racynski identifies three paths to defining the informal sector: (1) as a set of economic units, individuals and enterprises, (2) as a segment of the economically active population, and (3) as a socio-economic stratum of the population at a large. Portes (1983) uses this analysis to frame his article. Thus, these modes of definition were first categorized by Racynski, however, were assessed in Portes (1983).

informal sector, and in turn, the question "What is the informal sector?" can mean many different things. For the purpose of this analysis, several aspects of the definitional process are extremely important. First, does the informal sector refer to the kinds of business structures involved or to the characteristics of the workforce involved in informal activity? (Bonilla, 1990: 232). More simply, does the informal sector refer to individuals/groups or to an economic structure?" If, for example, informality refers to individuals, then the characteristics of these individuals become crucial to the analysis. Similarly, if informality denotes an economic structure, its nature is the pathway to definition.

Second, what Dasgupta (1992) labels the "subordination approach", and Portes and Schauffler (1993) refer to as the "marginality theorists", is particularly relevant. If, in the effort to define the informal sector, the level of subordination of both the individuals and the structure becomes the target of analysis, then the structure and the individuals are defined according to levels of oppression and subordination. It then becomes critical to the analysis of women's informal sector involvement to assess how power and subordination become linked in the definitional process.

And finally, the relationship between formal and

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<sup>21</sup> This question stems from Chilean sociologist Dagmar Racynski's threefold definition of informality (as cited in Portes, 1983 : 153).

informal sectors is also important. The autonomy of the informal sector from the formal sector is one of the most popular themes in the literature (Feldman, 1991). However, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, dichotomies have formed the foundation of much of gender and development research. Does the informal/formal dichotomy serve to subordinate the informal sector, and consequently, mystify its character?

Despite definitional debates, several common characteristics of informality have emerged in the literature. At this point, it may be useful to outline these general characteristics before discussing the dynamics of the definitional debate. Much of informal activity takes place outside legal and institutional frameworks and as such is not socially defined as "work". In turn, labour is not protected because legislative measures such as minimum wages cannot be enforced (Tokman, 1989: 1069). Other characteristics include: small size of operations, reliance on family labour and local resources, low capital, limited technology, limited barriers to entry, a high degree of competition, an unskilled workforce, and an acquisition of skills outside the formal education system (Berger, 1989: 6). Research which focuses on enterprise types use the microenterprise as the characteristic economic unit of this sector. A common definition identifies microenterprises as a business employing no more than five workers and having

assets less than US \$20,000 (Berger, 1989: 6). This focus has bypassed some of the important definitional debate by narrowing the analysis to a specific business type and has remained entrenched in an economic perspective of the informal sector.

## 2. The Inception of the Term

It has been argued that the definitional debate of the informal sector is merely an interrogation of semantics; that the debates are not about fundamental differences between the informal and formal sector, but rather, about the words used to describe these differences (Portes and Sassen-Koob, 1987). However, the definitional debates about the informal sector - be they "semantic" or more "functional" - provide a unique insight into the ways in which definitions are constructed in the discourse of development. In the depiction of market structures of the South, terms such as "fragmented, parallel and informal" appear more frequently than terms such as "monopolistic competition, oligopoly and contestable markets" (Lindauer, 1989: 1871). Related terminologies profess the "backwardness" of this sector (for example, the traditional sector, the precapitalist economy, and the marginal sector), and suggest that society could be compartmentalised into a modern capitalist and integrated segment and another opposite inferior segment (Portes, 1983: 152). Thus, early

articulations of the informal sector clung to the notion that informality was intrinsically connected to a state of underdevelopment.

The informal/formal model grew out of dual economy models, particularly that of Arthur Lewis, which became popular in the study of developing economies in the 1950s (Dick and Rimmer, 1980). Lewis' classical model distinguished between a "capitalist" sector and a "subsistence" sector.<sup>22</sup> A dual economy suggests that the informal sector is a result of an excess labour supply caused by the inability of the formal sector to absorb all those seeking employment (see for example Tokman, 1982). The model utilizes productivity as the distinctive characteristic of the economy: the economy is dualistic because the productivity of the formal sector is much higher than that of the informal (Tokman, 1989: 1068).

According to the model, the dual labour market will disappear as economies grow and generate sufficient demand for unskilled labour (Grindle, Snodgrass and Biggs, 1988). The conceptualization arose from the observation of a rapid urban growth which incited a rise in urban labour supply which was greater than labour demand (Portes and Schauffler,

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<sup>22</sup> The classical model of Lewis (1954) was later expanded by Eckaus (1955), and then Todaro (1969). The original model is found in:

Lewis, W. A., (1954), "Economic development with unlimited supplies of labour", The Manchester School of Economics and Social Studies, 22: 139- 91.

1993). In essence, a dual economy approach suggests that this rapid industrialization and rural migration created an informal economy (Hemmer and Mannel, 1989: 1543). The dual economy model provided a clear argument for a policy concentration that aimed to create more labour demand in the "modern" capitalist sector (Dick and Rimmer, 1980).

To a large extent, the definitional discourse on dual economies has relied on a direct comparison to the formal sector, in turn, the definition of informality becomes based simply on what the formal economy is not. Such a process may be limiting in that:

..if informal associations are conceived only as what formal associations are not, informal may come to denote the powerless, amorphous, unpredictable, privatized schemes for the pursuit of personal ends (March and Taggu, 1986: 9)."

In placing informal in opposition to formal, the distinction is made seemingly concrete and unchanging. Informality thus makes a division between those "in and those out of the modern sector" (Portes and Schaufli, 1993: 47).

There has been resistance to the notion of a dual economy as two distinct economic sectors (see for example Dick and Rimmer, 1980; Moser, 1981; Tokman, 1989). However, there is agreement among various perspectives that the model accurately explains the origins of the informal sector as

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<sup>23</sup> March and Taggu (1986) discuss a range of informal associations including religious and political associations. For March and Taggu, "informality" encompasses this broad range and is not defined by informal economic activities alone.

accelerated rural-urban migration and the labour surplus this move generated (Portes and Schauffler, 1993: 33). Thus, while many analyses attempt to escape the dualism of the model, it continues to greatly influence alternative formulations, and hence, reify some notion of dualism.

### 3. The PREALC Perspective

As the term "informal sector" became more prominent in the literature, perspectives emerged which challenged the notion that the poor were completely marginalized from employment (Portes and Schauffler, 1993). The informal sector terminology was reformulated and popularized in the late 1960s with the inception of the ILO's World Employment Program (WEP).<sup>24</sup> It was readily adopted in the early 1970s in Latin America by the ILO's regional employment program, identified by its Spanish acronym PREALC (Portes and Schauffler, 1993). WEP studies questioned the persistence of unemployment- much of it in forms not common in industrial countries- in spite of a satisfactory rate of economic growth (Singer, H., 1992). The focus of the program was the creation of more productive and secure employment. The target population of the WEP was the "working poor" who came

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<sup>24</sup> The classic document referred to as the birth place of the term is Keith Hart's International Labour Office report on labour markets in Ghana in 1972. The study was subsequently published in the following journal:

Hart, K., (1973), Informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana, Journal of Modern African Studies, 11 : 61-89.

to characterize the informal sector. The very existence of these so-called working poor in developing countries challenged preconceived notions of the relationship between poverty and unemployment:

The reason why unemployment was so readily, and perhaps justifiably, diluted into the albeit closely related, areas of concern, was the fact that one could have employment with poverty (the 'working poor'), whereas in the industrial countries we now see that one can have unemployment without poverty (the non-working poor) (Singer, H., 1992: 14).

The early work of the ILO re-defined the nature of poverty; the poor were not simply "there" (Portes, 1983). In turn, the "ominous" nature of informality was challenged. A more dynamic view emerged which viewed informality as a site of "popular entrepreneurship" and where lack of resources was "compensated by the ingenuity and motivation of the people involved" (Portes and Schauffler, 1993: 39).<sup>25</sup>

The work of Victor Tokman, who served as the director of PREALC, and who published widely on the informal sector, emphasizes the heterogeneity of the sector. Tokman argues that some enterprises in the informal sector have the potential for expansion, while others are merely subordinate to the formal sector and exist only as survival mechanisms (Tokman, 1989). For Tokman the defining characteristic for

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<sup>25</sup> Portes and Schauffler attribute this view of "dynamic entrepreneurship" to be solely evident in the early work of Keith Hart on Kenya. In general, they characterize the work of PREALC as having a "strong dualistic bent" (1993: 39).



heterogeneity is the linkages between the informal and formal sectors. He distinguishes between two broad subsectors. First, there are those enterprises which operate in markets where economies of scale are unimportant. In this sector the competition is weak, and in turn, expansion is possible. The second subsector is more vulnerable. It consists of jobs performed on an individual basis and is highly competitive. Tokman advocated enterprise oriented policies for the first sector and individual focused interventions for the second sector (1989: 1070).

Despite the re-definition of poverty promoted in the research and policy of the ILO and PREALC, the definition of the informal sector itself remained somewhat fixed in dualistic economic notions. In Latin America specifically, PREALC maintained that informality was caused by the processes of capitalist modernisation, namely import substitution (Sainz and Larin, 1994). The WEP, while spearheading increased policy and research interest in the workings of the sector, claimed that this sector was essentially a site of economic survival, and hence, a dysfunctional economic sector (Hope, 1993: 865). Although people working in the informal sector were labelled the "working poor", they were still poor. Ironically, the WEP is now in a position of fighting the "romanticism" of the informal sector for which it was often criticized in earlier research (Singer, H., 1992: 6). Much of the current policy

interest in the informal sector "romanticizes" the "popular entrepreneurship" of this sector, and in turn ,neglects that the sector is in fact heterogeneous, and also composed of the "working poor". For the Marxist school, it is these "working poor" who are the central subjects of analysis.

#### 4. Marxist Perspectives

From the general Marxist perspective, the informal sector is always a site of subordination. The neomarxist<sup>26</sup> approach characterizes informality and formality using Marxist principles of proletarianism and capital accumulation. Essentially, the informal worker is exploited by the capitalist producers of the formal economy. The exploitation functions to reduce the inputs of formal sector production and to keep labour costs low by providing wage goods at lower prices (Berger, 1989: 8). Similar to neoclassical economists, Marxist economists assume that job seekers in the urban areas of developing countries usually desire salaried employment. Thus, the informal sector is composed of unsuccessful job seekers (Telles, 1992: 109). The Marxist approach challenges the notion that the informal sector has the potential to accumulate capital and grow (Monroe, 1992:35).

Several nuanced analyses of Marxist principles have

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<sup>26</sup> Berger labels this perspective neomarxist. Elsewhere, this approach has been labelled simply a Marxist approach.

attempted to capture the heterogeneity of this sector. For example, the neomarxist approach criticizes traditional informal/formal dualist perspectives. The formal-informal dichotomy is replaced by a dominate-subordinate model (Roldan, 1985: 250). Production exists as a continuum, at one extreme exists artisanal or petty commodity production and at the other capitalist production. Each level of the continuum represents different degrees of subordination to the direct producer of capital. Although the informal and formal sectors are linked, the petty commodity sector never forms the dominant economic sector (Dasgupta, 1992: 1443). Such a model, however, does not transcend the dualist characterization of informal work as "traditional" and formal work as "modern".

Stemming from the assumptions of the PCP approach, the "underground economy approach" sees the informal economy as a direct result of increased competition on a global level. The process of globalization has caused the development of a new manufacturing base which focuses on subcontracting and piecework (Berger, 1989: 9). Similar to the PCP perspective, different levels of subordination are theorized. Moreover, the formation of a subcontracting base is predicated upon the weakness and vulnerability of labour (Beneria and Roldan, 1987). The underground economy approach is particularly relevant to the case of women since they tend to dominate in the "new manufacturing base" in forms of labour such as

industrial homework or industrial outwork.

The class analysis of these various approaches may suggest that informal activities are more complex than a simple dual economy analysis contends. Portes (1985) proposes a multiple relationship between labour and production in the sector. In his analysis of class structure he distinguishes between the informal proletariat and the informal petty bourgeoisie. Thus, one is not simply a formal or an informal worker. It should be noted that Portes, whom originally worked within a strict neomarxist perspective, later expanded upon prevailing Marxist conceptualizations of the sector in Latin America (see for example Portes and Schauffler, 1993). Here, he sees informality and formality as facets of the same economic system. The informal enterprise plays a complex and supporting role in the process of modern capitalist accumulation. Moreover, for Portes, the informal sector is involved in the active creation of new functions in the labour market and responds to new positions in the class structure (Portes and Schauffler, 1993).

Informal workers, in a Marxist analysis, are defined by their exclusion from "fully capitalist relationships of production" (Portes, 1985: 34). Again, despite attempts to capture the heterogeneity of informal activities, the defining characteristic of informality remains the exclusion from formality. Furthermore, Marxist perspectives are

concerned with degrees and levels of subordination. Thus, the sector is presumed to be a subordinate structure housing those who are just barely "surviving" economically. The increased growth of the informal sector in Latin America in the 1980s - as a result of the debt crisis and the accompanying World Bank imposed structural adjustment programs - has lent some support to this "survival strategy hypothesis" (see for example Arriagada, 1991: 80). Ironically, however, the neoliberal economic thinking of the 1980s reacted against the centrality of subordination in the Marxist perspective. Although the informal sector grew as poverty rates increased, the neoliberal perspective saw this sector as having the potential for providing economic prosperity.

##### 5. Neoliberal Perspectives<sup>27</sup>

Theoretical articulations, largely stemming from Latin American origins, which emerged in the last decade have rescued the concept of "entrepreneurial dynamism" which was evident in the early ILO work on the informal sector (Portes and Schauffler, 1993). Buvinc and Berger (1989), for example, in their collection of "women's ventures" in the informal sector, focus not on women as "victims" but on

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<sup>27</sup> Annis and Franks (1989) refer to this perspective as the legalist perspective due to its emphasis on the legal structures which prevent/motivate informal economic activity. This term, however, is not widely used in the literature.

women as "microentrepreneurs". The neoliberal perspective claims that the evolution of this sector will provide "valuable lessons to those countries which are desperately trying to manage transitions to democratic pluralist and market economic systems" (Hope, 1993). While the motivations behind this emerging faith in the ability of this sector to prosper is most obviously strengthened by the current endorsement of neoliberal economic policies (Portes and Schauffler, 1993) this alternative analysis represents a challenge to the analysis of informal sector labour. Rather than predicting how and why it exists, researchers from this perspective are attempting to understand how and why the informal sector can grow.

The neoliberal perspective, or as it is often referred to "the new right", supports an entirely different conceptualization of informality. Its origins are attributed not to an excess labour supply, but rather to excess regulation of the economy (Portes and Schauffler, 1993). Accordingly, the absence of legal and institutional barriers is viewed as a key advantage of the informal sector. The theoretical discussion of the new right has been largely influenced by the writings of Hernando deSoto, particularly as discussed in El Otro Sendero (The Other Path). In fact, Sainz and Larin (1994) cite DeSoto as the sole theorist working from this approach. Annis and Franks (1989), however, see this approach reflected in a greater body of

work. While DeSoto is the best representation of this view, and perhaps the originator of this particular type of analysis, the approach exists outside of the writings of DeSoto (see for example Hope, 1993; and the policy reports of ACCION International).

From the neoliberal perspective, informality is seen as a result of bureaucratic interferences, hence, the "new right" invites an opening up of markets to competition by taking away the protection and privileges of modern industry (Annis and Franks, 1989: 16). The so-called "other path" depicts a country which "works hard, is innovative and fiercely competitive, and whose most conspicuous province is, of course, informality" (DeSoto, 1989: 258).

DeSoto argues that this economy is "pro-poor", but does not depend upon heavy external borrowing, new indebtedness or warfare with the IMF. The essence of growth is found in the mobilization of the informal sector (Annis and Franks, 1989: 16). For DeSoto, popular disregard for formal legal restrictions upon the economy motivated a deregulation of the economy. Informality is a process of rebellion; a popular reaction to a restrictive legal structure. His informal entrepreneur is not a marginalized actor, but "something of an economic hero who manages to survive and even prosper despite state oppression" (Portes and Schauffler, 1993: 40). This depiction is markedly different from former characterizations of informal workers. For

DeSoto, informal workers should be seen "not as victims, or backwater, or a side effect, but as Peru's best and most realistic hope for development" (Annis and Franks, 1989: 19). The proliferation of large credit agencies (for example, ACCION International) echoes this rally cry. These agencies provide loans under the assumption that the recipients are small business persons and not merely victims of poverty. Rather than viewing the informal sector as a dysfunction of development, suggests DeSoto, researchers should begin to focus on how it can generate development.

#### 6. What to do with the Informal Sector: Development Policies

Development of the informal sector is best categorized along two major perspectives: structuralist and legalist<sup>24</sup>. The legalist school parallels neoliberal economic thinking. A decreased role of the state is suggested and financial support for microenterprises is proposed (Annis and Franks, 1989). Obviously, the legalist school views the informal sector as having the potential to increase economic growth. As in neoliberal economic thinking, this economic growth will be hindered by bureaucratic interferences. Thus, the fewer legal interferences, the better.

The structuralist school adheres loosely to a Marxist

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<sup>24</sup> Portes and Schauffler (1993) categorize these perspectives differently. They use three categorizations. The first two loosely adhere to the structuralist and legalist perspectives discussed. They propose a the third alternative perspective which is then labelled "structuralist".



framework of the informal/formal dichotomy and sees the role of the state as one of equalizing the differences between the formal and informal economies. This approach is readily evident in the writings of PREALC. Legislation such as minimum wage protection can be used to limit exploitation. The structuralist approach maintains that the informal sector is exploitative, however, the poor can contain this exploitation by seizing the political tools of the state (Annis and Franks, 1989: 10). The role of the state should be neither eliminated nor increased, but rather made more efficient (Tokman, 1989: 1075). Structuralists do not see the informal economy as isolated from the formal economy or as comprised solely of microentrepreneurs. The rationality of production is different in the informal sector; the goal is to ensure survival rather than to generate and accumulate profits (Portes and Schauffler, 1993).

Despite the apparently diverse views of the structuralist and legalist schools, the need for credit to support microenterprises is seen as a necessity (Grindle, Snodgrass and Biggs, 1988:2). The structuralist and legalist approaches are often synthesized in credit policy (Portes and Schauffler 1993: Annis and Franks, 1989). A synthesis would not call for the complete dismantling of legal and labour protection restrictions as would a more orthodox legalist approach. The result of the dismantling would merely be the informalization of the entire economy which

would eliminate the advantage of informal microenterprises. Instead, a development plan which is as "flexible as the new firms it is trying to promote" would be supported (Portes and Schauffler, 1993: 56).

A policy focus on the informal sector comes with little apparent risk. While this sector serves as a labour source and provides goods and services, thus far, it has met these functions without any financial support (Hemmer and Mannel, 1989). Support of the informal economy may have several hidden benefits to development agendas including the collection of lost fiscal and tax revenues (Connolly, 1985: 57), the efficiency of creating a less "costly" informal job (Landivar, 1989: 220), and the possibility of supporting the poor without any threat to the rich (Feldman, 1991: 67). Parallels can also be drawn to a "human resource development" ideology; policies explicitly reflect an approach that promotes efficient growth by using the poor's most abundant resource - labour (Salop, 1992: 2)<sup>29</sup>. Thus, the informal sector development agenda may not be one of simple income generation promotion, but instead, its agenda may be based on the mandate of using the abundance of labour as an impetus for growth.

Despite these "hidden agendas", the main aim of development agencies proposing informal sector support - to

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<sup>29</sup> This human resource development perspective was expressed in Salop's article "Reducing Poverty: Spreading the Word", Finance and Development, 1992, 29, 4, 2-5.

better the income levels of those in this sector- is a necessary one. The sudden rise of interest in the informal sector in Latin America was in response to a severe economic crisis. The debt crisis illustrated that economic growth would not be rapid, in turn, it was highly unlikely that labour surpluses would be absorbed by the formal sector (Tokman, 1989: 1068). Nonetheless, in mainstream neoliberal development discourse, the informal sector has come to represent the "ideal" free market; absent from the distortion of state intervention it can become the site of the rebirth of small business.

In general, the long term goals of informal sector support cannot be ascertained from the literature. Similarly, it is difficult to conceive of a prognosis outside of the informal/formal dualism. Thus, the goal of informal sector development may either be formalization; developing the informal sector to a level of productivity equal to that of the formal sector. Or conversely, the goal may be the informalization of the formal sector; formal sector production will be restructured along lines traditionally labelled as "informal" to decrease the costs of productivity. Nonetheless, the mainstream development agenda has targeted policies at this sector based on the assumption that the informal sector can be a site of "development".

## II. FEMINIST THEORY AND THE INFORMAL SECTOR

Discussions of the informal sector have been largely male biased (Feldman, 1991; Scott, 1991; Sainz and Larin, 1994). The theoretical emphasis on the informal/formal dualism tends to neglect the variability of the participation of women in this sector. Sainz and Larin suggest that approaches which emphasize the labour process, instead of a production focus, enable an analysis of gender:

[G]ender distinctions allow us to consider the phenomenon of heterogeneity in the informal world from another standpoint than that of modalities of economic unit. We focus on gender as an analytical tool in order to detect how far the distinctions caused by economic processes persist or, on the contrary, are questioned and redefined (1994: 435).

Further, they suggest that a gender analysis must include a "reflection on identities" and a more "qualitative type of understanding" (1994: 435). For Sainz and Larin, gender is not merely a factor in the informal sector equation, but a means of moving toward a greater understanding of the informal sector itself. This is the central question which will now be pursued. The analysis moves on to an examination of the interaction of feminist theory and perspectives of informality.

### 1. Women in the Informal Sector: An Overview

In general, women are involved in informal work twice as often as men (Connolly, 1985: 76). While this statistic accurately reflects a high participation rate of women, it

may also reflect the tendency to "classify" women's labour as informal labour more often than men. Estimating the amount of female participation in the sector has been notoriously problematic and inaccurate. Economic estimates have been severely criticized for their inability to differentiate between criminal and informal activities proper (Portes and Schauffler, 1993). The percentage estimate of women involved in the Latin American informal sector in 1980 was estimated at 35.7 % (Mezzera, 1989: 52). A more recent 1985 survey of selected Latin American cities gives estimates ranging from 8.4% to 25.1% (Arriagada, 1991: 86). However, studies in some countries have reported extremely high participation rates. In Bolivia, specifically, the percentage of microvendors that are women has been reported at 71% (Escobar, 1989: 67). Due, in part, to the fact that very little data is available on small establishments, it can be assumed that the actual size of the sector is underestimated and most likely underestimates the number of women workers (Tokman, 1989: 1071; Arriagada, 1991: 73).

Informal sector income is usually below minimum wage and women earn less than men performing the same job in the informal sector (Bonilla, 1990: 23).<sup>30</sup> Much of the research on women suggests that the segment of the informal sector

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<sup>30</sup> This statistic refers to the case of Latin America only. however, the trend has been noted in other regions (See Beneria, 1992).

which has the autonomous capacity to grow and which is not simply dependent on the formal sector, tends to consist of male rather than female activities (see for example Elson, 1990: 40). In the heterogenous informal sector, women are more often connected with subsistence type activities (Moser, 1981).

The participation of women in the urban informal sector is usually classified under two modalities: (1) production activities for which they are subcontracted in some way to produce intermediate or finished goods for formal sector companies (often labelled "industrial outworking/homework"), or (2) self generated activities such as the marketing of their services or sale of food and other items (Bonilla, 1990: 234). Much of the involvement of women selling goods in the informal sector is an extension of their so-called reproductive role, such as the preparation and selling of clothing and food (Beneria and Roldan, 1987).

Small businesses may be particularly attractive to Latin American women for several reasons: (1) traditional activities, such as garment making, can be turned into businesses, (2) the flexible structure allows women to "divide" domestic responsibilities with their vending responsibilities, (3) there are few barriers to entry (i.e. low capital, low education), (4) due to the location, which is often in the home, women can be involved in more than one task at once (Otero, 1987: 6).

The current focus on the microenterprise as the unit of analysis serves to conceal the variability with which women participate in this sector. For example, PREALC excluded domestic service from its established definition when its focus changed. Such an exclusion was based on the fact that women in domestic service represented wage earners and not "productive units" (Mezzera, 1989: 57). Quite obviously, an inclusion of domestic service in reported statistics would increase reported participation rates of women. Between 1960 and 1980, domestic service accounted for the majority of all women's informal sector activity (Tokman, 1989 : 1071).

## 2. Theorizing Women's Participation

Initially, women's involvement in the informal sector was completely ignored in the research. Women were not addressed nor was their participation considered a separate focus of analysis. As discussed in the opening chapter, the emergence of the WID analysis was largely concerned with an examination of the ways in which women could be integrated into the development process. With this mandate, women's participation in the informal sector began to be recognized. A gender analysis motivated an effort to determine the ways in which women were "left out" of development policies aimed at the informal sector.

However, the integration of women has been problematic as theories of the informal sector are inherently male

biased. In the general tendency to treat women as an outside category of analysis in development discourse, the experience of women is usually explained in a "special category". The possibility that the experience of women may negate the assumptions of a particular theory is rarely addressed.

The experience of women fundamentally challenges the tenets of the dual economy approach. The dual economy approach, when applied to women in the informal sector, implies that women represent a surplus labour force: a labour force unable to find work in the formal sector. However, women may also participate in the informal sector due to factors such as location and the possibility of combining tasks (Otero, 1987). In many Latin American countries, such as Bolivia and Peru, there is a common pattern among migrant women workers where they first work as domestic labourers and then move into the market with the birth of the first child (Bunster and Chaney, 1985: 19; Gill, 1990: 122). Despite this pattern, domestic service is often excluded in "precise" definitions of the informal sector due to its lack of association with the market and the microenterprise unit. Thus, if one considers domestic work "formal" then this pattern opposes the employment movement of the dual economy approach as women move from the formal to the informal sector. If one considers domestic work "informal", the dual economy approach is negated by the



fact that "informality" is governed by the ability to "balance" reproductive and productive work.

A "gendered" informal sector theory may challenge the traditional criterion of the informal/formal dichotomy by suggesting that gender may play a role in defining "informality" and not only characteristics such as legal status and capital accumulation. Much of informal sector theory has not analyzed how gender may play a role in selectively incorporating women into a form of labour which is insecure and vulnerable (Scott, 1991). The consequence of a focus on the conditions in which women work in the informal sector- rather than an analysis of how gender has shaped this labour market- is that the complexity of women's labour remains absent from development policy (Feldman, 1991: 74). The current focus on the microenterprise increases this absence. The variability of women's participation in this sector is neglected as the microenterprise and the microentrepreneurs become the only subjects of analyses.

### 3. The Microenterprise and Empowerment

Informal sector analyses which focused on production dovetailed with mainstream liberal feminist approaches which saw the productive role of women as the key target of policy. While research from the legalist school does not focus on women (for example, DeSoto's "other path" rarely

mentions women), the title "microentrepreneur" is not restricted to men alone. Moreover, there are many researchers advocating the view that women form an important proportion of microenterprise owners (Buvinic and Berger, 1989).

Credit is viewed as the most critical vehicle for increasing the position of women in the informal sector (see for example Otero, 1987). Lack of access to capital is considered the primary obstacle to diversification to other more profitable types of nonwage work within the informal sector (Escobar, 1989: 68). Policies aimed at women have focused on eliminating the many of the practical obstacles to credit access such as illiteracy, inhibition with formal lending agencies, and collateral limitations (Buvinic and Berger, 1990; Lycette and White, 1989). Training and technical assistance have often accompanied credit provision programs (McKean, 1989: 120).

While credit is believed to provide women with an increased standard of living (see for example Berger, 1989: 20), as yet, there is little documented evidence of the impact of credit on women microentrepreneurs, or on the impact of credit based on the sex of the loan recipient (Buvinic, Berger and Jaramillo, 1989: 227). Credit provides more power to those facing economic instability, but does not change the structural features of the economic context in which the instability occurred (Mizrahi, 1988: 2).

Credit provision offers an incomplete analysis of women's experience. Many large scale mainstream credit access programs have not encompassed an analysis of the roles of women apart from their informal labour and have failed to encompass the "organic linkage" between the household and the business (Buvinic and Berger, 1989). While credit allows for a more balanced devotion to multiple tasks in the home and in the microenterprise (as suggested by Otero, 1987), the numbers of hours spent working by women is still extremely high because demands in the home remain unchanged. Moreover, as the focus of analysis is the microenterprise unit, linkages between the household and the business are usually discussed in terms of their affects on economic productivity.

Policies which focus solely on credit provision have not addressed the deeper problem of a lack of legal and institutional framework which are partially responsible for the low incomes prevalent in the informal sector (Tokman, 1989: 1073). Missing from credit access programs are policies aimed at the protection of labour, unionization , wage restrictions and sickness and maternity leave.

Credit access has become part of the policy and language of researchers outside the liberal feminist sphere. The widespread use of the practical/strategic gender needs dichotomy (see specifically Moser, 1989; Molyneux, 1985; Young, 1988) has allowed planning to differentiate between

women's basic needs and the larger systemic issues of gender subordination. Informal sector support is viewed by most gender and development researchers as a means to provide women with basic practical needs.

However, informal labour arrangements may be preserved over time regardless of changing economic conditions (Feldman, 1991: 71). The reality may be that the provision of women's basic needs through informal sector employment, may support the participation of women in that segment of the informal labour sector which does not have the ability to grow and prosper (Elson, 1990: 40). In Latin America, the evidence illustrates that most women marketers do not work their way up from petty retailing to larger, more capitalized enterprises, and most maintain the level of production at which they entered the market (Babb, 1989: 102; Bourque and Warren, 1981: 197). Such an economic position may greatly inhibit the ability of women to address issues of gender subordination (in the language of planning - the "feminist" strategic gender needs) in the future.

The identification of women as potentially empowered entrepreneurs is quite a distinction in a discourse which is typified by universal characterizations of women of the South as "victims". However, the power implied in such a depiction is cursory; it refers to economic empowerment alone. Despite the desire to empower women through credit

access, this analysis of power is locked into a power/powerless dichotomy and it is assumed that power must be given. As argued by Jane Parpart, the development project has constructed "Third World women's problems as technical problems requiring a technical (usually Northern) answer" (1995: 229). This is simply evidenced in the use of the terminology "microentrepreneur". The term microentrepreneur makes all women the universal small businesswoman. It carries connotations of "innovation and risk taking" (Chen, 1994). Women of the South are empowered on the terms of the development project; by naming them "microentrepreneurs", Western development experts can readily accept their ability to be powerful. It allows these experts to use technical knowledge to "solve" development problems (Parpart, 1995). As microentrepreneurs, women of the South become constructed "in terms of feminism's own 'narcissistic' self image" (Hirshman, 1995: 51).

#### 4. Female Bias

The dominant feminist analysis of the informal sector is heavily shaped by the liberal feminist mandate. In this mandate, two aspects are given primacy in research and policy. First, the goal of development is to make women "visible" and integrate them into the development process. As has been suggested, this includes an integration into conflicted and dichotomized visions of the informal sector.

Second, the productive role of women is stressed. In informal sector analysis, this has shifted the focus onto the microenterprise unit. To reiterate, although this mandate has introduced "gender issues", it has not created a "gendered" discourse on informality. A gender analysis must go beyond a critique of the underestimation of women's informal labour, and reveal that the model itself is inherently gender blind (Scott, 1991). However, feminist analysis which moves beyond a liberal feminist perspective proves also problematic.

Criticism reacting to the absence of women's experience in discussions of the informal sector motivated a series of studies emphasizing the inherently "informal" character of women's employment (Wilson, 1993). Researchers in Latin America noted that the informal sector was increasingly becoming "feminized" (Tokman, 1989: 1071). Caroline Moser and Kate Young (1981) noted that women "rarely achieve heights of pseudo-autonomy" in the informal sector, further, they become "that labour force which the male entrepreneur depends on for his success" (61).

This tendency formed the basis of what has been labelled by Scott (1991) "female bias". Female bias, suggests Scott, emphasizes the function of women's cheap and unpaid labour to the urban economy. The informal sector becomes a "female sector" as the characteristics of labour become the defining elements. The impression given is that

"feminized" forms of labour dominate this sector, and consequently, are crucial to the entire functioning of the urban economy (Scott, 1991: 108).

Scott (1991) has maintained that arguments for the intrinsic connection between female labour and informal sector labour have tended to work within the informal sector paradigm. She contends that a sexual division of labour exists within the informal sector, and in turn, such a segregation increases the axes of segmentation. Gender may play a role in actively incorporating women into a form of labour which is insecure and vulnerable, however, this incorporation is not defined succinctly along the formal/informal dichotomy. Understanding how gender interacts and crosscuts the segregation may have important implications for the transformation of the informal sector model:

First, it means that the ideal-typical characterisation of 'formal' and 'informal' only ever applies to one sex and excludes the other, second, it is not solely supply determined but is a fundamental structure of demand; and third, since gender crosscuts the informal/formal sector division, rather than running parallel with it, one cannot maintain that there is a single axis of segmentation in the labour market- there are two (Scott, 1991: 109).

Scott agrees that gender may play a role in defining "informality" and not only characteristics such as legal status, capital accumulation or number of employees, however, all informal workers are not women, and thus, the relationship between informality and gender is complex and

discursive. Thus, she suggests that analyses which contend that the informal sector is in fact a female sector, are also plagued by a dichotomous view of the informal/formal relationship.

Feminist research which has examined the exploitative nature of the informal sector has brought a much needed social analysis to a largely economic discourse. However, women have also become inherently tied to this exploitation. Research and policies which remained fixed in the formal/informal dichotomy identify women as "the poorest of the poor", in turn, they merely become the best example of marginalization.

The trend of female bias may have several roots. First, it is reflective of the inability of standard definitions of so-called productive labour to encompass the economic activities of women. Feminist critique has challenged the ways in which economic theory has conceptualized women's waged labour and has "emphasized the limitations of definitions of the economic which exclude the production of use values and the reproduction of labour power" (Redclift, 1985: 94). Despite much progress in making women's labour activities visible to international statistics (Beneria, 1992), many economic activities performed by women are often unrecorded because they do not fall into official definitions of what constitutes "employment" (Brydon and Chant, 1989). In the case of women's informal work, the



inability to use traditional market indices, has motivated the use of the term "informal sector" as a residual category in which much of women's economic activities are lumped.

The female bias of some of the current literature is also connected to a larger theoretical trend to typify patterns of labour, in which women dominate, as informal, insecure and vulnerable. Standing characterized the decade of the 1980s as a period marked by the "global feminization of labour":

[T]he types of work, labour relations, income, and insecurity associated with 'women's work' have been spreading, resulting not only in the notable rise in female labour force participation, but in a fall in men's employment, as well as a transformation of many jobs traditionally held by men (Standing, 1989: 1077).

In the analysis of the connection between women's increased involvement in deregulated labour markets, particularly those of the export processing zones, and the overall increase in deregulated labour, labour which is denoted as insecure and vulnerable is consequently denoted as "feminine". The selective incorporation of women into the new manufacturing base has triggered an important examination of the "feminization" of particular labour patterns.<sup>22</sup> Again however, the process of "feminization" of labour is governed by preexisting theoretical

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<sup>22</sup> For example, Krishna Ahooja-Patel (1993) poses that critical question to the export oriented strategy of the newly industrialised countries (and especially the neo-NICS); Can this be labelled export-led growth or female-led growth?

constraints:

The problem here is the treatment of women working in the border industries as a homogenous category, so that 'women' are added on as a single category to a preconceived analytical concept. It is more helpful to use the concept of gender relations which permits a desegregation of women by socio-economic class, age, education, marital status etc., in order to understand the interaction between various sets of social relations within and between the labour market and the family (Pearson, 1991: 146).

Early analysis of women's wage employment focused on the female marginalization thesis; the maintenance of women's marginalization from the process of capitalist industrialization (see for example Brydon and Chant, 1989: 167). Such a thesis was based on a somewhat circular and simplistic argument. The thesis argues that female workers are marginalized into the lowest paying sections of the productive structure because they are low paid. The thesis leaves the question unanswered: why are women less paid? The "cheapness" of women's labour is only one factor:

[G]ender plays a role in structuring labour markets not just as cheap labour, but as subordinate labour, docile labour, immobile labour, domesticated labour, sexual labour and so on. Thus, it is not just dimensions of marginalisation that need to be distinguished, but dimensions of gender (Scott, 1986: 673).

To understand women's active integration into selected industries, theoretical perspectives must go beyond a simplified process of feminization. Quite obviously, the predicted danger of "feminization" is that women's increased economic role reflects the spread of precarious and low paid

forms of labour to many other spheres of labour (Standing, 1989: 1094). But equally dangerous, is to understand this division has succinctly drawn along gender lines. Such an analysis seemingly invites the labelling of the process of "feminization" to be equivalent to a process of "informalization". The emphasis of such perspectives is on women (and men) as a cheap labour sources but not on the meanings attached to such work (Ong as cited in Udayagiri, 1995).

The general tendency to portray women of the South as the "other" reifies the connection between informal forms of labour and women. Women of the South, as "traditional", as "backward", and above all, as "victims", appear as likely inhabitants of a sector which is also "traditional" and "backward". Yet, just as the informal/formal binarism can be challenged, so can women's "other" status be reconsidered. The displacement of one binarism calls into question the other.

### III. BEYOND DICHOTOMIES: An Interrogation of the Informal Sector

Despite various interpretations of informality in the development literature, there are some common assumptions about informal sector activity. In the Marxist analysis of underdevelopment, it is assumed that precapitalist modes of production (i.e. the informal sector) would be destroyed by

the expanding capitalist system. Likewise, in classical neoliberal economic development theory (as articulated by Lewis), agricultural labourers would eventually be transferred to the formal urban system to meet the growing urban industrial demand (Portes and Sassen-Koob, 1987). The overall theoretical consensus is that the informal sector functions as a survival strategy for those at the margins of the modern economy.

The survival strategy analysis presents a simplistic vision of labour movement between sectors. More recent analysis has reacted against this elementary model and proposed that both the labour movement between sectors and the labour within the informal sector itself is more heterogeneous (Portes, 1983; Sassen-Koob and Portes, 1987; Tokman, 1989; Portes and Schauffler, 1993). However, there is little theoretical guidance governing this reconceptualization. And now, more than ever, there is a trend towards ignoring the complexity of the sector with a pure microenterprise focus.

Informal sector analyses have established links between transforming economic conditions and the informal sector (Feldman, 1991: 59). Essentially, most approaches view the informal sector as a result of a particular relationship to formalized capitalist structures - be it one of surplus extraction (Marxism), of overextended legality (legalist), or of labour surpluses (PREALC). Many researchers stress the

importance of the global economic restructuring to the workings of the informal sector ( see for example Standing, 1989; Portes and Schauffler, 1993; Beneria and Roldan, 1987).

As yet, however, there has been little interaction between informal sector theory and the literature which specifically discusses "post-fordist"<sup>22</sup> trends in production, labour and consumption". Post-fordist analyses have attempted to trace changing patterns in labour flexibility and to examine what they label the "crisis" of fordist modes of mass production. These "post-fordist" theorists are interested in many aspects of this debate including the new international division of labour, the decentralization of labour, the domination of multinationals and the feminization of the workforce (Hall, 1991: 58).

For the purposes of an informal sector analysis,

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<sup>22</sup> The term post-fordism intersects with the term postmodernism. Both are grounded in a sense of "dislocation" (MacDonald, 1991). Post-fordism also expands outside the economic arena into social and cultural debates (Hall, 1991). Post-fordism is often used interchangeably with "flexible specialization" and "flexible accumulation" (Harvey, 1991: 70), or it may be couched in the more general term "new times" (Hall, 1991). Thus, because of these ongoing definitional debates will not be directly addressed, the term is used rather loosely here. However, it is used to center the analysis on specific flexibility debates with the acknowledgement that the term does have a broader meaning. See MacDonald (1991) for a clear analysis of these debates.

<sup>23</sup> Of course, there are theorists who are examining global labour patterns and their relationship to informality. See, for an example, and particular reference to the sexual division of labour, Walby, 1989. However, these analyses are most applicable to industrial homework and outworking.

debates on the flexibility of labour are particularly relevant."<sup>24</sup> Post-fordism suggests that labour is becoming more flexible, more decentralized, and more fragmented. However, post-fordist writings have exhibited a formal sector bias and have been primarily concerned with the movement of global capital in the formal sector. Generally, "underdeveloped" regions are discussed as the bargaining sites which "enable companies to employ geographic mobility as a threat" (Harvey, 1991: 68). The labour which post-fordism labels more "flexible" is most often the labour of the formal sector.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, the informal sector may provide the archetypal post-fordist worker - decentralized, fragmented and flexible. This alone is motivation for a cross pollination of literatures.

In the writing of DeSoto and others in the new right school, an influential challenge to the "victim" characterization of informal workers is being voiced. In the

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<sup>24</sup> Some would object to the simple combination of post-fordism and flexibility (as cited in MacDonald, 1991). Others see it as the key idea (Harvey, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> Obviously, this is a general reasoning for the lack of interaction. MacDonald (1991) provides a more thorough examination of the issues which post-fordism has addressed. She contends that the studies are usually of two types: (1) case studies at the firm or industry level, and (2) more "sweeping investigations" at a larger national or international level which use aggregate employment data or anecdotal methods (MacDonald, 1991: 189). As informal sector employment defies measurement, accurate aggregate data is difficult to acquire. Thus, this may provide further reasons for why post-fordist analysis has focused on formal labour.

presentation of the "microentrepreneur" identity, DeSoto suggests that economic survival can be done through dynamic and unique means. Kempe Hope (1993) suggests that the expansion of the informal economy evidences alternative development paths to that of formal development aid projects. In this sense, he implies that the "subterranean" economy is redefining the development project. The informal economy, the legalist school continuously stresses, involves more than simple subsistence level activities.

However, the legalist school remains established in neoliberal economic perspectives. While it is true that in informality, new forms of "modern" economic development are being drawn, the "new right" sits uncomfortably positioned in neoliberal thinking. The success of the informal entrepreneur is usually imagined in his ability to exercise his business skills in a free and open market. Despite DeSoto's attempts to historicize the informal sector in the context of Peru, his analysis stresses economic factors, and hence, neglects important cultural and social factors. Neoliberal enthusiasts have embraced DeSoto's informal economy with insufficient regard for the specificity of his analysis.

Essentially, informal sector analysis has not escaped the formal/informal dualism. Although there has always been the assumption that the dualism may be problematic (see for example Dick and Rimmer, 1980; Moser, 1981), the discourse

has not had the means nor motivation to escape this formulation. The definitional struggle reveals the fundamental tendency in development to adhere to a dualistic conception of economies, of labour, of men and women, and most importantly of development itself. In many ways, informality has become the "other". The informal sector has become what the formal sector is not. It is not modern and not able to grow. It is largely a "dysfunction" which so-called development economies only experience to a small degree (hence, a sign of "underdevelopment").

The fundamental conflict of informal sector analysis as to whether this terminology applies to an economic sector or to those employed in it. This definitional conflict has not been given due attention in the literature. The question as to whether we are referring to a "person" or to a "structure" when we use the term informal sector is crucial. It is the difference between individual focused interventions and structural interventions. And perhaps most importantly, it is the difference between subject relevancy and subject irrelevancy. If the informal sector is the home to excess labourers, then the important characteristic of these labourers seems only to be the fact that they are excess labourers. Or in other analyses, it is only their entrepreneurial ability that will allow them to overcome economic sectoralization.

In not resolving essential definitional premises,



informal sector analysis has basically escaped the use of a subject. When the subject surfaces, it is a subject with an imposed identity - that of microentrepreneur or marginal labourer. Missing from the research are important insights on what the experience of life in the informal is like. This insight demands a subject. We need to see how identity shapes informal labour and vice versa (Sainz and Larin, 1994: 435). This analysis requires a use of experience and voice which sees subjects as contingent and discursive.

The activities of the informal sector, the people who are involved in this sector, and the structure itself, are diverse and changing. When Keith Hart stated in his 1972 ILO study that the informal sector was a "way of doing things", he may have been the closest to encapsulating the workings of this sector in a single phrase. The problem is not that research has rejected the assumption that the sector is heterogenous. The problem is that this heterogeneity is defined economically and according to formal sector relationships (see for example Tokman, 1989). This is to say, the informal sector is heterogeneous because some businesses expand and prosper and are more "formal" in nature than "informal". Ironically, microenterprises which can expand become the evidence for heterogeneity by simple virtue of their incongruence with the "traditional" and "subsistence" characteristics which have typified the identification of the informal sector. This tendency to

define heterogeneity according to formal sector relationships and according to economic factors, reflects a disengagement with difference. Missing then, are reflections about difference within the informal sector, irrespective of its relationship to formal structures.

While a gender analysis of informal sector theory has provided a framework for examining the relevance of the informal/formal binarism to the analysis of women's work, it has not allowed the researcher to move beyond this essential dichotomy. The most progressive of research rejects the invisibility of women's experience (Feldman, 1991) and the informal/formal distinction (Scott, 1991). However, the analysis cannot be propelled out of this problematic. Why might this be the case?

As echoed by Mridula Udayagiri, much of gender and development discourse is permeated by the assumption that women can only be emancipated through "economic rationality", and moreover, they are only "passive victims" in this process (Udayagiri, 1995: 163). Although Udayagiri finds feminist perspectives which are based in a postmodern deconstruction problematic because of their overemphasized textual analysis, she does support the assumption of this approach that development policy and practice remain engrained in political economy perspectives. The essential problem, as argued by Mitu Hirshman (1995), is that gender and development discourse considers the sexual division of

labour the central concept of analysis. The sexual division of labour is used unquestioningly as a universal structure oppressing all women. However, such a structure is founded in disputed concepts of labour and production:

It will not do to simply revise or extend these concepts which repress, distort and obscure many aspects of women's existence. Instead of seeking to 'widen' the concept of production why not dislodge it or any other central concept from the authoritative powers of Western male discourse? (Hirshman, 1995 :50)

Using the sexual division of labour as the key to analysis, suggests Hirshman, merely widens pre-existing theoretical constraints but does not fundamentally challenge their relevance.

This "widening" process is illustrated in various ways, some overt and some more subtle, in the discourse on informality. Clearly, the overall trend in the discourse is an integration of "gender" issues and not a gendered theory. A Marxist perspective, for example, has introduced the notion that women's reproductive role governs their productive role in the informal sector (see specifically Babb, 1986; 1989). Nonetheless, while reproductive factors can be "added" to the informal sector model, the model, in its present form, cannot account for the variability of women's participation. Women participate in both informal and formal labour. To posit an essential tie between women and the informal sector, is in fact, to equate being female with being an informal worker.

Much of informal sector discourse has not concentrated on the inner heterogeneity of the sector. So too, however, has feminist theory neglected the shifting, temporal and changing nature of women's participation in this sector. Eudine Barriteau proposes that in the case of Caribbean women specifically, when studies present conflicting results, the information is viewed as contradictory rather than as "illustrating the multiple, shifting interactions of women's lives" (1995: 146).

Informal labour challenges the application of the reproductive-productive dichotomy. Again however, the tendency is to use this challenge to widen the concepts rather than to question their essential meaning and relevance (see for example Babb 1986; 1989). Feminist analysis suggests that the market represents an arena where the reproductive role becomes productive. Many activities can be "dovetailed with women's domestic responsibilities" (Scott, 1991: 117), the selling of goods is considered an "extension of household work" (Beneria and Roldan, 1987), and with the birth of a child, women are forced into the informal market where responsibilities can be combined (Bunster and Chaney, 1985). Other analyses also maintain that the market is an arena where the productive may become reproductive. Often women may bring home unsold goods, furthermore, women and children may spend so much time in the market it becomes their "home" (Mitchell, 1989: 27).

As it is assumed that the reproductive/productive dichotomy shapes all women's lives, much of the feminist analysis of this sector is concerned with identifying and positioning these roles in the analysis. By accounting for these roles, it is nearly assumed that the analysis is then "gendered". Hirshman argues that ignorance or neglect are not the critical targets, instead, gender and development researchers should concentrate on challenging the basic Marxist thinking that "labour is the essence of 'being human'" (1995 :52).

By remaining inside the confines of androcentric and Eurocentric conceptualizations, feminist analysis only asks certain questions. Research has focused on drawing "new" divisions between dichotomies to account for complexity as many feminists are reluctant to abandon concepts such as the reproductive/productive dichotomy (see for example Walby, 1991; Udayagiri, 1995). However, why should we focus our concern on whether informal marketing represents an extension of reproductive roles or a productive role in and of itself, particularly when one role is connected to power and the other to powerlessness? While the answer may gain some insight into the dynamics of the sector, it will always limit the variability of women's experience.

Thus, what is required is an analysis which can shift the discourse beyond the central dichotomization depicting women's work in the informal sector as either "powerful" (as

implied by much of the current liberal feminist approaches to female microentrepreneurship), or women as "powerless" (as does feminist analysis which focuses on women's connection to exploitative labour structures). This central dichotomization is flanked by several supporting binarisms. The feminist-not feminine dualism propagates a theory that allows the researcher to judge the "power" of credit provision by weighing its ability to meet so-called strategic gender needs. This dichotomy allows "Western feminist scholars to reify the superiority of Western feminism" (Marchand, 1995: 63). The reproductive-productive binarism allows research to use the "Marxian imaginary" which simply "reproduces the androcentric and ethnocentric bias inherent in the Enlightenment philosophy " (Hirshman, 1995: 49). And finally, the powerful - powerless dichotomy permits us to assume that women of the South are "powerless unified groups" (Mohanty, 1991).

Certainly, in moving beyond dichotomies, it is the characterization of informal workers as "victims" that will be the most difficult to escape. While this identity permeates all development discourse, it is particularly evident in the informal discourse where the identity of "marginal" has a long history. Given the long working hours, the poor working conditions and low rates of pay, there is no doubt that informal work is not a desirable and secure form of employment for most women. This is not at question.

What is at question, is how we begin to understand and describe this experience in a way that assumes that women are neither microentrepreneurs nor victims? A gender analysis has motivated a movement towards a more complex understanding of informality. Nonetheless, in the end we are returned to the central problematic of the first chapter: the experiences of women of the South have been universalized and mystified by current dualistic conceptions of the informal sector. What is evidenced by the experience of women in this sector is the fact that women sit discursively "in between" the very categories used to compartmentalize them.

Thus, this is where the analysis must take us - into the discursive context of women's lives. Such a theoretical leap requires that the shifting and temporal voices of women from the South are heard. Moreover, identity and experience must be utilized to interrogate the interaction of the various imposed "roles" of women working in the informal sector. Most importantly, experience will be used not as "evidence" for a theory of the informal sector, but instead, it will be utilized as a tool -although, constructed and interpreted- to "view" the multiplicity of women's lives in this sector.

If a more qualitative and subject oriented analysis is required, then we must understand what this discourse will look like, how it will be created and by whom. The next

chapter will discuss the advantages and obstacles of using experience and the testimonies of experience to transform discourse and analysis. By using the voices of various Latin American women working in the informal sector, the chapter will illustrate the interaction of these voices with the theoretical "voice" of informal sector analysis. Much of the development discourse on the informal sector theory would suggest that there are but two voices speaking in unison: those of the informal sector victim and of the microentrepreneur. However, the heterogeneous experience of women in the informal sector suggests otherwise.



### CHAPTER THREE: "Voice", Voices and the Informal Sector

Postmodern criticism has argued that feminist writing from the West has tended to paint a universal "woman of the South". This "woman" is most often created through a juxtaposition against women of the North, against "man", and against "development" (Mohanty, 1991). In turn, postmodern analysis has suggested that gender and development researchers, and indeed all researchers, should focus on the ways in which colonial representations can be overturned. Marianne Marchand suggests that "we need to find ways in which poor, working- class women's feminine concerns can actively participate in the production of feminist theory" (Marchand, 1995: 64). In this project, she suggests, "voice"<sup>3</sup> plays a critical role.

The goal of feminism, for the most part, has been to make visible the female and the feminist subject. Feminism reacted against philosophical and social thought which presumed the subject was masculine. Accompanying this general trend was the political assumption that feminism must retain a universal feminist subject as the oppression of women was assumed to have universal and hegemonic sources

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<sup>3</sup> "Voice is used here as it is most commonly used in both feminist and nonfeminist writings. Voice, as suggested by Susan Gal , denotes "the public expression of particular perspective on self and social life, the effort to represent one's own experience, rather than accepting the representations of more powerful others" (1991: 176). Gal argues that feminist writing has usually deplored silence. However, as will be discussed, silence may also signify power.

(Butler, 1990). Thus, from this perspective, "emancipation depends upon locating or constructing such a unity and speaking in its name" (Flax, 1993: 23).

As reviewed in Chapter one, postmodern critiques have suggested that the subject "woman" is always a contentious one. Likewise, the experience of being a "woman" is equally contentious. Postmodernism reacted against standpoint feminist analysis which argued that standpoints - while not absolutely true - do capture a "less partial and less distorting" version of reality (Longino, 1993: 211). Joan Scott advocates a reversal of the traditional relationship between subjectivity and experience; "it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" (1992: 26). The simple act of making experience visible, she argues, merely reproduces the terms of the ideological system.

It was argued in Chapter Two that early informal sector analysis exhibited a general neglect of the unique experience of women (see also Feldman, 1991). Later feminist analysis reacted to the very visible presence of women in the informal sector and the corresponding curious theoretical absence of women's experience in the analysis of this sector. However, much of these critiques excluded the experiences of some women in their common depiction of women in the informal sector as "working class victims" (Barriteau, 1995: 144). Theories which focused on the

ability of women to be microentrepreneurs did mark an important challenge to this victim characterization. However, despite the acknowledgement that not all women were "dynamic entrepreneurs" (Berger, 1989: 11), these studies often positioned the fictional "powerful microentrepreneur" as the end goal of development policies (see for example Buvinic and Berger, 1990). Similarly, these studies maintained a sense of women of the South as "vulnerable others" waiting to be taught the "technical" answer to their small business problems (Parpart, 1994).

In order to challenge these exclusionary conceptions of informal labour, "we need to create discursive spaces where the voices of Latin American women can be heard" (Marchand, 1995). However, while postmodernism has called on the voices of women to challenge Western versions of truth, these same experiences are assumed to be an always contested and contingent domain. Thus, if voice is to challenge dominant representations of the informal sector, the necessity to speak and act as a woman must be reconciled with the meaning we attach to the experience of being a woman (Butler, 1992: 15).

This leads to a fundamental problem - How do marginalized voices speak in a hegemonic discourse? How do we know that we are hearing what is said?

Truly listening to others entails moving outside your own conceptual frameworks, especially the binary thought structures and patriarchal character of most Western knowledge. It requires

the recognition that differences, and different voices, cannot just be heard, that language is powerful and that subjectivity (voices) are constructed and embedded in the complex experiential and discursive environments of daily life (Parpart, 1995: 362).

As Parpart maintains, truly listening is a process of "overcoming barriers". It requires that we challenge Western conceptions of knowledge. It requires that we abandon the notion of a "development expert" and begin to examine the ways in which knowledge can be produced from discursive sites of experience.

This chapter will tackle several related issues. First, the analysis will focus on a deeper interrogation of the use of the experiences of women in the informal sector discourse - how experience forms and informs images of women of the South and how experience has been utilized in theory. Second, the analysis will attempt to map out how experience may be used to challenge current conceptualizations of the informal sector. It marks an effort to problematize questions of subjectivity and experience in light of this specific development issue.

The connected discussion of testimonial literature will also be examined. While no specific testimonial literature on the informal sector is examined, an inquiry into testimonial literature provides a forum where the interaction of voice and experience is uniquely elucidated. This review is intended to introduce the obstacles involved in "hearing voice", even in its somewhat unadulterated

testimonial form. The central purpose in this examination is to query how and when "voices" can transform understanding. Testimonials are often used interchangeably with subjectivity; the testimony is uncritically adopted as evidence of a subject. However, language can be both a site of power and a site of powerlessness, who governs this power may be critical to discerning the governing of "voices".

The conclusions about experience, subjectivity and voice will then be related to various texts where voice is utilized in some fashion. Again, these examples are taken from the writings in English on the urban informal sector in Latin America<sup>37</sup>. Two of these examples focus on Peru: the case study of Peruvian marketwomen and domestic workers as described in the text Sellers and Servants (1985) written by Ximena Bunster and Elsa Chaney , and Cecilia Blondet's article on urban migration to Lima entitled Establishing an Identity: Women Settlers in a Poor Lima Neighbourhood (1990). Some life stories from Daphne Patai's collection entitled Brazilian Women Speak (1988a) will be discussed. Also, Precarious Dependencies (1994) , Lesley Gill's study of domestic service in Bolivia will be examined.

All of these studies use the voices of women in the informal sector in their analysis. However, voice is

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<sup>37</sup> The choice of texts were limited by barriers of language and availability. Therefore, I could not ensure geographic or cultural representation. However, I made every effort to seek out all possibilities. The four texts were the only suitable examples found after extensive research.

utilized differently in each. Daphne Patai presents a series of life stories, while the rest of the authors weave statements from interviews throughout the text. These examples discuss geographically, socially and culturally distinct areas. The focus is not on a comparison of "experience" per se, but rather, it is the voices themselves which are the point of investigation. The actual content and information of the voices is significant to the investigation - What are women in the Peruvian informal sector saying about their life? Do the voices of Brazilian women illustrate that theory has misunderstood and misinterpreted their existence? Do Bolivian domestic workers see themselves as victims? However, the key point of analysis is the interplay of voice and text. It is this weaving that may reveal the most about experience, subjectivity and voice and about when and if voice can be used to subvert dichotomized knowledge systems about women in the informal sector.

#### I. EXPERIENCE AND VOICE- Revealing the Subject of Informal Discourse

In her discussion of the postmodern interrogation of feminism, Judith Butler asks the question "What speaks when "I" speak to you?" (1992: 8). Postmodernism has launched the most exhaustive and serious critique of the monolithic feminist subject "I". In so doing, the feminist subject has

been recreated as discursive - no longer a biological nor sociological category , but rather, "a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic and the sociological" (Braidotti, 1994: 4). When Maria Luisa 'Papusa' Molina reflected on her life as the simultaneity of her Chicana/Mexicana/Lesbian identities she described her discursive existence in this way: "Always in the border, or better said: I am the Border. The site of contradiction and encounter: One" (1994: 449). Postmodern feminists have jumped headfirst into this "border" searching for the point of subjectivity. However, while it is in this "nomadic subject" (Braidotti, 1994), or this "eccentric subject" (de Lauretis, 1990), that postmodern feminists theorize a subjectivity which may be free from essentialism, false truths and hegemonic discourse, what exactly happens in this "border" demands further articulation.

Some critics have claimed that postmodernism goes too far in deconstructing the subject "woman" (Walby, 1992; Soper, 1991). Anne Marie Goetz argues that in postmodern analysis, the female subject is ultimately revealed as a fiction:

With neither sexuality, nor social identity a biological given, the very possibility of female identity , which is romanticized in cultural feminism, is rendered problematical by the deconstruction of both the concept 'women' as opposed to men to a deconstruction of the identity women (1991: 147).

Goetz argues that as feminists we need a "minimalist, but

objective, grounds on which to distinguish between truth and falsity" (1991: 149). She sends a crucial question to all feminists - how do we know what we claim to know? And in addition , what is the role of experience in this knowledge?

The informal sector discourse has been largely influenced by a liberalist perspective (see Chapter One; Chowdry, 1995). Formed in Enlightenment thought, liberalism sees knowledge as formed through the rational Cartesian subject. Experience is then used as evidence - "what could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through" (Scott, 1992: 24). However, liberalism also holds that to be a subject is a privileged position. While Northern liberal feminists tended to appeal to a common experience of oppression and were able to recognize themselves "in their foremothers" (Scott, 1992: 30), women of the South became these "traditional and non-liberated" foremothers waiting to be "civilized and developed" (Chowdry, 1995: 28). In turn , when the experience of women of the South is discussed it "exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics" (Scott, 1992: 25).

There are few examples in the literature in English on the informal sector where the voices of women are used directly in analysis. Generally, women of the informal sector have not played an integral role in the knowledge produced about them. This may be due to practical obstacles



such as economic and time constraints, and language or education barriers. However, it is also due to the fact that the glorification of the expert and of expert knowledge has reified the notion that knowledge of modernity is best acquired through Northern assistance (Parpart, 1995: 229). Such an assumption contributes to a devaluing of the experiential knowledge of women of the South.

This valuing of technical knowledge has produced a very business oriented policy approach to current research on the informal sector. The research on female microentrepreneurs concentrates on improving the "access" of policies to poor women and the provision of credit (see for example Lycette and White, 1989; Buvinic and Berger: 1990). The subjects of such studies are reduced to loan recipients. Buvinic and Berger (1990), for example, in their study of sex differences in small enterprise credit programs, concluded that the reason women were receiving smaller and fewer loans was largely due to "the fact that few women applied" (695). "There seems to be no intentional bias against women ", they argue, "but there is a bias against those sectors of the economy where women predominate" (1990: 705). This conclusion suggests that the "experience" of being a woman can be overcome if policies are restructured. They propose technical answers such as interest rate changes and standardized loan applications to "enhance women's participation" in small credit schemes.

The experience of women in the informal sector, although rarely voiced by the women themselves, does however surface in the discourse. It has been used as evidence against male experience. The experience of women may challenge prevailing conceptualizations of the workings of the informal sector by suggesting that theories of the informal sector only explain the reality of men (see for example Feldman, 1991). Caroline Moser's 1981 study of Ecuadorian women argued that women's informal involvement illustrated that women did not move in and out of the labour force<sup>2</sup>. Instead, they were always working but "at different stages in their life-cycle moved along the continuum (informal/formal)" (1981: 28). Studies like Moser's used the experience of women to challenge dominant ideas on both formal and informal employment.

Commonly, experience has also been utilized in the discourse to formulate a fundamental connection between women and informality. Take, for example, Standing's much cited 1989 article Global Feminization through Flexible Labour. Here, he equates informalization with feminization. He argues that the "widespread informalization of labour in most sectors" can be explained by the "relative growth in the use of female labour around the world and a 'feminization' of many jobs and activities traditionally

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<sup>2</sup> The IDS Bulletin devoted an entire issue to informal sector employment (vol.12, no.3). Moser's article was among the articles which put women on the informal sector agenda.

dominated by men" (1989: 1080). Women's experience of economic oppression is used as a verification of a connection between labour deregulation (read informality) and the increased participation of women in the workforce.

The problem of these various utilizations of experience is not that these accounts of the experiences of women are "wrong" - women who work in the informal sector do suffer a unique economic subordination. The problem is the way in which experience becomes defined. These formulations use experience as ultimately shaped by the relations of production - "a unifying phenomenon, overriding other kinds of diversity" (Scott, 1992: 29). Giving primacy to the relations of production establishes in advance the experiences which will be considered relevant to the analysis (Hirshman, 1995). In much of the informal sector analysis, it is the experience of labour itself which is assumed to be central. This is a predictable trend in a discourse which uses the informal sector as a "category to locate the poor" (Peattie, 1987: 858). Missing are important reflections outside the relations of production.

Peggy Antrobus suggests that women's experience of informal sector employment puts them in a "privileged" knowledge position for theory transformation:

Women's multiple roles place them in the best position to balance social, cultural, ecological and political goals with economic growth. Women are not confused about the fact that the purpose of economic activity is to satisfy human/social needs (1992: 56).

Antrobus' support of a theory based on the experience of women clearly values the notion of experiential knowledge and of poor women in particular. She suggests that women "naturally" propel themselves out of the production paradigm given their "multiple roles". Antrobus' assertion leads us dangerously close to assumptions of universalism and essentialism. To assume that all "women are not confused" about the answers to development, is to assume that all women, despite their "multiple roles", have a common experience of oppression, and in turn, a common answer. Like the view of Standing, the experience of being a woman becomes inherently tied to the experience of working in the informal sector. If we consider the experience of working in the informal sector to be a universal experience, then the " 'sexual division of labour' and 'women' are implicitly treated as 'commensurate analytical categories' outside of race, class, history and culture" (Hirshman, 1995: 45).

Experience must not be used as an unchanging and completely observable site of subjectivity, instead, it is a partial and situated explanation. The discursive nature of women's informal experience demands that we enter the "border" of the intersection between subjectivity and experience. In claiming plurality, however, one is still faced with the "ancient problem of distinguishing knowledge from opinion and what the distinction amounts to" (Longino, 1993: 212). To assume that any "finally coherent subject is

a fantasy" (Haraway, 1992: 96), requires that voices emerging from Latin America must too be critically examined.

Thus, "voice" cannot be presumed to in and of itself transform the informal sector discourse. Identity is not "simply there waiting to be expressed" (Scott, 1992: 33). However, the voices of women from the South may provide opportunities for women to actively participate in knowledge production and introduce alternative perspectives on the informal sector. One could cite many examples of "several rags-to-riches stories" in the informal sector (Portes and Schauffler, 1993: 56). While these stories may challenge the victim characterization of women of the South, in using experience as evidence, they do not challenge the essential dynamics that created the characterization. Geeta Chowdry argues that voice should be a "recognition of diversity" and not of an indisputable truth (1995: 56). In this recognition we should remember that voice too constructs the subject (Marchand, 1995).

## 2. Testimonial Literature and Voice

Testimonial literature and autobiographical texts are perhaps the "purest" vehicle for the voice of women of the South. In these texts women are able to convey their experience directly in the written word. By briefly examining how experience is presented in this textual form, one can begin to uncover the challenges and obstacles in

using experience to transform discourse.

Testimonial literature is a unique and important literary "genre". Life histories "refer to the generic category of recorded participant narrative" (Marchand, 1995: 97).

Testimonies have a more political nature as the narrative is often motivated by the urgency of a situation such as war or revolution. Testimonies are not strict biographical or autobiographical forms. Critical to the definition is that the structure and practice of producing testimonial literature disintegrates the centrality of the author. It is common practice that an editor collaborates with the subject of the narrative to produce a testimony. The subject of the narrative often positions herself as a speaker of a cause and of a people. In turn, the "self cannot be defined in individual terms but only as a collective self engaged in a common struggle" (Gugelberger and Kearney, 1991: 8).<sup>40</sup>

Postmodern analysis of development discourse has a rather obscure relationship to the Latin American voice. On

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<sup>40</sup> I use the term 'genre' to indicate that testimonials have been researched and discussed in literary circles as a particular form or type of literature. Certainly - as suggested by the inclusion of testimonials in this analysis - this 'genre' has political and social significance as well.

<sup>41</sup> This defining point is not without debate, as will be discussed. For example, Marchand (1995, forthcoming) prefers to emphasize the political implications of testimonies in her definition. However, I would argue that collective subjectivity - although debatable - is essential to the understanding of the relevance of testimonies inside and outside of Latin America. See Summer and Fall 1991 Issues of Latin American Perspectives for further debate and analysis.

the one hand, it heralds the emergence of new voices from the South, but on the other hand, it cannot claim these voices as "true". The rise of previously unheard voices in Latin American testimonial texts marked an important stage where the "object" of study demanded subjectivity. Through these texts, marginal voices rewrote, retold, and corrected Latin American history:

Testimonial literature is a cultural form of representation which is forming not only on the margins of the colonial situation, but also on the margins of the spoken and written word and as such challenges conventional literary representation of subaltern peoples. The marginal ambiguity of testimonial literature is reflected in this oxymoronic term which attempts to contain the contradiction inherent in a kind of writing that is generally a spoken form (Gugelberger and Kearney, 1991: 6).

Testimonial literature represents a fundamental challenge to knowledge systems by interrogating the subject/object distinction - those who speak/ those who are spoken about. Quite obviously, this parallels the postmodern concern of questioning enlightenment epistemological foundations at the level of discourse and at the level of politics.

Nonetheless, western feminism has often romanticized these voices and tended to envision these subjects unproblematically (Salazar, 1991: 93). Texts such as I Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala have at once been the prize and the target of feminist deconstruction. While testimonial literature emerges from the periphery, the telling of experience does not necessarily escape the

constraints which plague all history and theory - "It does not come to us in unadulterated form : people speaking their souls into our ears" (Patai, 1988: 143).

Language, in a very practical and real sense, presents several obstacles to the presence of a Latin American voice in development discourse. When the spoken word - usually not English - is made into text , much of its dialogue may be lost in the effort to structure an analysis. As Claudia Salazar laments, in the backstage production of oral histories "monologues are unveiled beneath the semblance of dialogues" (1991: 100). The distance between the spoken word and the written word can only be lessened but not eliminated. Punctuation, pauses and certain words disappear in the written text. These accounts are literary accounts and if presented in prose structure can have a "profound affects on the readers experience of the text" (Patai, 1988a: 19).

Silences, and what Doris Sommer calls "Rigoberta's secrets" (1991), become equally as important as the written text. Silence is often used as a symbol of passivity and powerlessness. However, silence can also be a "strategic response" of "resistance to dominant, hegemonic cultural forms" (Gal, 1991: 197). In her fractured atypical text where poetry, reflections and meditations are interspersed, Maria Luisa Molina attempts to maintain a dialogued discourse - "a space for my voice and also to provoke you,



the reader to fill the gaps " (1994: 451).

Testimonies are not safe from the control of hegemonizing theory. The editor, the collaborator, the ethnographer, and even the reader, can transform testimonies into "a Western logocentric mirror that reflects our own assumptions " about what a narrative "should look like " (Salazar, 1991: 98). Often we treat a life story as a "tool" as a "reality is presumed to lie beyond it" (Patai, 1988a: 18). However, life stories do not present us with a "reality" but "with its verbal evocation by a particular individual in a specific situation" (Patai, 1988a: 15).

The telling of their own stories through the written word is itself a "luxury" to which few Latin American women have access (Patai, 1988). Subjects are more often selected, and hence given voice, than emerging from individual choice or otherwise "natural" selection. Equally problematic, is the assumption that these stories exist as an autonomous and unaffected genre:

...sometimes, attempts to uncover and locate alternative, non-identical histories code these very histories as either totally dependent on and determined by a dominant narrative, or as isolated and autonomous narratives, untouched in their essence by the dominant figurations. In these rewriting, what is lost is the recognition that it is the very co-implication of histories with History which helps us to situate and understand oppositional agency (Mohanty, 1992: 84).

In the end, argues Mohanty, the territory of the colonized, will always be characterized by movement - movement between cultures, languages, meanings and power (1992: 89). Thus, to-

attempt to "fit" and locate testimonies into a particular history is problematic. In "using" testimonies, Christine Salazar suggests that one should "celebrate discourse over text, dialogue over monologue, polyphony over monophonic authority" (1991: 98).

Despite all its limitations, testimonial literature does present and struggle for a space for marginal voices. George Yudice argues that it is a space that "hegemonic" postmodernism can only label as an absence. Postmodernism can deconstruct text and conclude that the "other" is missing - "the is not against which the subject of discourse is" (1991: 21). In contrast, testimonial writing can face the problem of representation. In the case of women in the informal sector, testimonies may be the only venue for "(marginalized) Latin American women to conduct their struggle at the level of production of knowledge" (Marchand, 1995: 71).

Postmodernism may have something to learn from testimonial literatures's collective subject. In fact, it is in this collective subject that anti-postmodernism's charges that the discursive postmodern feminist subject is apolitical and "dead" may be refuted. In testimonial literature she is very much alive. It is almost, as Lynda Marin contends, as if "each speaker feels the necessity to warn us to resist the power of our Western obsession with individuality" (1991: 53).

One of the most cited characteristics, and similarly most popular targets of analysis, is the notion that the testimony reflects a convergence of the personal and the political. The "I" in testimonials is not merely a composite, rather, it is a site of interactive consciousness and experience. When Rigoberta Menchu denies that her story is unique or remarkable "the private/public dichotomy becomes blurred in a textual move that is politically motivated" (Salazar, 1991: 94). The identity of the speaker is also blurred. It is at once personal and collective (Yudice, 1991). The "I" in testimonials is not exclusively a method to subvert in an individual identity. It is an active "recoding" of identity itself.

What do testimonials tell us about the use of experience in rewriting knowledge? Clearly, the telling of life stories cannot simply be "earnest excavations of the forgotten" (Chow, 1989: 161). Nor can we ignore "the partial construction of the subject and the intervention of the ethnographer" in testimonial literature (Marchand, 1995: 106). Further, as evidenced in Rigoberta Menchu's use of the "two master discourses" of Marxism and Christianity, testimonies can "be part of the struggle for hegemony" (Yudice, 1991: 29). Due to our devotion to the autobiographical subject, we may prefer to hear a "present and knowable self" (Sommer, 1991: 32). However, by acknowledging the potential of testimonial literature, we

should not too easily assume its victory. We should be careful of relying too much on the spoken word and "perhaps too jubilant expectations of the testimonio as salvational discourse " (Gugelberger and Kearney, 1991: 12).

Having said this, the experience in testimonials is not "fetishized" as "otherness" (Yudice, 1991: 28), moreover, these experiences are not metaphorical but an attempt to "document a reality" (Gugelberger and Kearney, 1991: 11). The fact that the testimonials do not deliver experience on a plate may be conscious and necessary. Projections of truth may "allow for an unproblematic appropriation which closes off the distance between writer and reader, disregarding the text's insistence on the political value of keeping us at a distance " (Sommer, 1991: 32). In the collective subject of testimonials we see a prospect for a political union on the basis of survival rather than a shared oppression.<sup>4</sup> It is the struggle itself which unites the subjects and not the similarity of the struggle.

Testimonial literature illustrates the necessity for discourse to maintain a dialogue. There must be a place for silences; places which neither the reader nor the speaker may define. And perhaps most importantly, testimonial

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<sup>4</sup> Mohanty (1992) uses the survival/shared oppression distinction in her rethinking of the notion of sisterhood. She attributes this distinction to:

Reagon, Bernice Johnson, (1983), "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century, in Barbara Smith, (ed), Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology. New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Colour Press.

literature highlights the importance of entering the borders of the feminist mandate "the personal is political". The line between the personal and the political is an ambiguous one. More ambiguous however, is the meaning of these terms themselves. Testimonial literature suggests that the personal may - at moments in time - be collective. At other points, the personal is co-opted and reformulated by the reader. In general, testimonial literature illustrates that voice is not the mirror of knowledge; however, nor is voice the mirror of Western versions of knowledge. Voice has a crucial role to play in uncovering the sites of change and rebellion in the development project. The next section will examine the role of voice in moving the informal sector discourse beyond the formal/informal dichotomy and beyond the productive sphere.

## II. HEARING THE VOICES OF THE INFORMAL SECTOR

The goal of the present analysis is to examine the "weaving" of experience and voice. While the theory espoused by the various authors is examined, a central focus is to examine how this theory affects the analysis and presentation of voice. These texts provide examples where the lived realities, and women's perspectives of these realities, is considered crucial to the inquiry. This raises several questions. How is experience used? How does this approach transform the discourse? If - as has been argued

throughout this analysis - experience can radically challenge informal sector discourse, do these various texts serve as example to this? Clearly, experience cannot simply be delivered; voices cannot simply be voiced, how in turn, do the authors invite the women of their studies to be active participants in a dialogued development theory?

### 1. Constructing an Identity: Dialogues and Monologues

Ximena Bunster and Elsa M. Chaney published the findings of approximately 50 interviews with Peruvian women working in the informal sector in the text: Sellers and Servants: Working Women in Lima Peru (1985)<sup>22</sup>. The study focuses on two "traditional" occupations in urban Peru: domestic workers (servants) and street or market vending (sellers). Accordingly, the first chapter entitled Agripina focuses on "servants" and the second chapter entitled Maria focuses on "sellers".

Following the introduction, Bunster and Chaney begin a sixty page chapter with the brief life story of a woman named "Agripina". Agripina is an eighteen year old migrant to Lima and is of Quechua ancestry. She is a domestic

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<sup>22</sup> The authors of the text are given as Chaney and Bunster, Young is cited for the photographs. However, in the table of contents Chaney is cited as the author of the Introduction and the first and third chapters. Bunster is attributed with the rest. For the purposes of the analysis both authors will be cited in all cases. It is assumed that the study is a collaborative one, and hence, will be cited in this manner.

servant earning the equivalent of U.S. \$30 per month. The identity which is discussed under the given title "A Profile", is later revealed to be a composite. "Agripina" as an individual does not exist. Succeeding this brief composite are pages of factual historical and sociological information on women working as domestic workers in Peru.

The first motion on the part of the authors to see identity as a composite is very revealing. It exposes the intention to emphasize the commonality of experience rather than difference. In introducing a "demographic profile of the typical maid-of-all work in urban Peru" (12), Bunster and Chaney use Agripina as a symbol. A symbol which is in fact "created from data gathered from several sources" (12) by the authors themselves.

Agripina is the only composite in this study; "the other women are among 50 interviewees whose stories told here are their own" (12). To be a composite is to be made up of parts. Agripina is the end product of a collection process in which a variety of "general" characteristics were chosen and were then sewn together by the authors. The power of creation is the author's alone. As readers we can only assume that the women studied were more alike than different. Immediately we are forced to diminish differences. Immediately, it is suggested that in the identity of "Agripina" differences are not important.

Is difference vital here? June Roland Martin warns that

"no trap is more dangerous for women than the self-made trap of false difference" (1994: 646). For Martin, the a priori assumption of difference is equally as problematic as the a priori assumption of similarity. For others, however, seeking contradiction is crucial. Chandra Mohanty argues that one task of feminist analysis is "uncovering alternative, non-identical histories which challenge and disrupt the spatial and temporal location of a hegemonic discourse" (1992: 84). This is particularly relevant for informal sector theory which has been dominated by Western economic theories.

"Agripina" is a testament to the fact that these women are "interchangeable". Although the author's attempt to expose the oppression of the women, they proceed using the image of the common victim "Agripina". In turn, these women become situated as "what we are not" (Ong, 1994: 377). This imposed identity is one of the main targets of both postmodern feminists and feminists from the South (see for example Scott, 1992; Ong, 1994). By positioning the experience of working in the informal sector as the key point of understanding women's experience, Bunster and Chaney assume a priori that there is an "indisputable and innate essence" to the experience of Peruvian women (Hirshman, 1995: 45). Experience is used by the authors as evidence; evidence for the universal applicability of an experience shaped by the relations of production. The effect



of this exclusionary use of experience on "voice" is that it is created as a monologue. Missing are the dialogues between subjects and between the authors and the subjects.

One of the central functions of Lesley Gill's study of Bolivian domestic workers entitled Precarious Dependencies, is the examination of mistress-servant relationships. In order to explore this relationship, Gill combined the technique of participant observation with the use of archival sources" and oral history interviews of sixty-one former and current domestic workers and thirty-five employers. The research revealed that similar to the Peruvian context, young women moving from the countryside to work as domestic servants will be "educated" by their mistresses. Affluent mistresses attempt to "reform immigrant women as women, as well as discipline them as workers" (Gill, 1994: 14). Thus, many employers feel that the relationship is reciprocal. Teresa Menciaho, a Bolivian employer, speaks to this issue:

I've had girls to whom I've taught everything right from the beginning, shaping them to my lifestyle and what I want. Then along comes another person and offers to pay them more and they are gone, leaving me without any help. You can hardly go to the window to shake out a rug without the maid downstairs asking you for work. I don't like this because it creates rivalries between neighbours. But you can't help it. The

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" Gill drew on court cases involving sixty-nine servants and their employers between 1930 and 1952. For the post-revolutionary period (post 1952), she utilized newspaper accounts and oral-history interviews. See pages 10-14 for a thorough explanation of her methodology.

first thing that the maids do after they get to know each other is compare salaries (Gill, 1994: 82).

Employers also feel that they too share economic hardship and discrimination. Claudia Landazuri, a forty-six year old divorced mother of two laments "...In the offices we get to a certain age, and the bosses don't want older women. It's the same in every office: they prefer young women" (Gill, 1994: 87). Similarly, Manuela Leon speaks of the difficulties in balancing motherhood and her career:

I either realize myself as a woman or realize myself as a mother. You really can't do both, because something always suffers. Being a mother is more than just vaccinating your children, and if I were to go back in time and pursue a career, I would not have children (Gill, 1994: 92).

Lesley Gill's use of voice illustrates that the mistress-servant relationship is affected by both a sense of a common "female oppression" and differences between women. While, Claudia Landazuri feels discrimination because of her age, she feels her situation is different from other women: "You're not going to go out on the street to sell a few tomatoes and peppers like an Indian, because you're not made for this kind of work" (Gill, 1994: 87). However, in other cases, employers may appeal to a common experience of "womanhood". Here, the wife of a high ranking military official, explains why she locks her maid's door at night:

Every night before I go to sleep, I lock the maid in her room because I have sons. In La Paz it is very common that the patrons, especially the sons, go into the maid's room. When my maid learned how to speak Spanish, I told her that she had to take

care of herself because of the men -you know how men are (Gill, 1994: 76).

These voices which speak about female relationships are crucial to informal sector analysis. They allow for an analysis of power which is not encapsulated in the male-female dualism. Moreover, these voices create a dialogue between women. We get the sense that these women are speaking not only to the author but to each other. This dialogue makes a space where women can comment on their economic situation but also about how their identity as a woman is defined by themselves and by others.

Daphne Patai's Brazilian Women Speak (1988) is a collection of contemporary life stories of twenty different Brazilian women<sup>45</sup>. For Patai, these life stories are the "identifiable and unique constructions of the individual women and not creations of mine" (1988a: 9). These constructions, Patai remarks, seem to create a subject; the necessity to tell a life story invites a structure, and in

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<sup>45</sup> The life stories were collected through interviews. Patai does not include the interview questions in her text but "retains clear traces of them". In the editing process, Patai frequently omitted "comments which seemed to be reflections of my own intrusive questions rather than of the women's own concerns". See her introduction for an analysis of her role as interviewer. This theme will be revisited in The Struggle in the Text section of this chapter.

<sup>46</sup> Some of the women whose life stories are collected in this volume worked in the informal sector at some point in their lives, some were working in the informal sector at the time of the interview, and others were neither. The present analysis utilized the life stories of women who had worked or were working in the informal sector, and life stories of women who had employed or were employing a domestic servant.

turn, "one rethinks the events of one's life so they make sense" (Patai, 1988a: 18). This imposition of structure does raise some issues for the interpretation of the text, as Patai contends, however, the opportunity to tell a life story gives the subject a forum to understand his or her own subjectivity. It creates what could be called an "inner dialogue". This is evidenced in the life story of Marta, a thirty-five year old teacher who employs a maid. Upon the conclusion of her interview, she commented how she had focused on the problem of her husband not doing his share of the housework:

Yes, Yes, I know I've talked almost exclusively about this problem. This is a problem that right now is troubling me profoundly. It seems to me that when a problem crops up a lot in my talk, it's because I'm trying to resolve it. It's begun to trouble me so much that I've got to look for a way out, and this is my way of starting to look for a solution (Patai, 1988a: 207).

In Brazilian Women Speak, the reader is able to see instances where the speaker and the text interact. While the process of imposing a linear structure on a life history is limiting, there are many stories in Patai's book where the boundaries of chronological and of language are challenged. As in the case of Marta, there are also instances where the speaker reflects on these boundaries in the "telling" of her story. Ultimately, these words contribute to the creation of an important dialogue between the speaker and her voice.

Thus, these various texts exhibit that "voice" is not merely a delivered monologue. Rather, it is a site of plural

and simultaneous dialogues between subjects, between the author and the subject, between the reader and the subject, between the author and the reader, and between the subject and her voice. These dialogues need not devalue the narrative itself. The maintenance of these dialogues can serve to transgress cultural and political boundaries because it is an exchange within "which all readers must locate themselves" (Marin, 1991: 65).

## 2. Power and Powerlessness

In Sellers and Servants, Bunster and Chaney expose through the details of everyday life the trials of working in the informal sector. It is clearly a difficult life. The life paths of these women seem to be formed at an early age. The women of this study came to Lima primarily because of the prospect of better income opportunities. Some had employment as domestic servants prearranged through the presence of a *madrina*<sup>4</sup> who may act as a sponsor to young female migrants. There is a common desire for paid employment among young migrants, however, there may be several other related reasons for migration:

Alberta: I came (to Lima) practically alone in the company of an aunt, or rather a *senora*. I grew up

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<sup>4</sup> This translates to 'godmother'. Here it refers to any women who 'adopts' a little girl and initiates her into the servant role. The arrangement can be both formal and informal. In formal arrangements, the girl works as a domestic servant in exchange for her education and upbringing. See Bunster and Chaney, pps. 40-43.

abandoned, without a family (42).

Regina: I had separated from my husband because he ran off with another woman. That was the reason I came to Lima. In the Sierra I couldn't support myself, my husband didn't give me anything. I came alone...(40).

Emilia: I came with the senora who brought me here to work for her. I was fifteen years old then, the senora put a pile of ideas in my head. She told me that life was better here, I came with the illusion of earning money (41).

Bunster and Chaney emphasize the conditions which led to migration. Inevitably, the voices they deliver suggest the lack of freedom in the decision process. The voices characterize migration as the only alternative.

In Cecilia Blondet's study of popular housewives in San Martin de Porres, a district of Lima, she emphasizes the common factor that all migrants in her study "took their own individual decision to go" (1990: 18). She uses a woman named Pilar as an example of this. Pilar was determined to come to Lima, thus, although her "conditions" of migration are similar to those of Alberta, Regina and Emilia, Blondet considers the voice of Pilar to be a voice of choice:

Well, I came after many many arguments with my mother and father. They weren't at all happy with me. So I was going to go away and find work. They had wheat, maize, everything there. But no money. And as my brothers were younger, they needed to study and needed someone to help provide the money (1990: 18).

Pilar's act of migration is an act of rebellion. She rebels against her condition. When she arrives in Lima, she chooses independence over reliance on relatives:

I was always proud of not going to the house of my uncle and aunt, because I thought they were going to say 'you have come to our house'. That's why I decided to work to send money back to my family (Blondet, 1990: 19).

The differences in voice in the two texts are very subtle but have profound affects upon the reader. Bunster and Chaney exhibit the tendency to lock their analysis of power into a binary structure of power and powerlessness. The quotations of women are used throughout as evidence of powerlessness. It follows that powerlessness becomes understood solely as a "condition"; the reflections of these women are inserted in the text as factual evidence of their powerlessness. Conversely, the possible power of migration is not presented.

In Lesley Gill's study of Bolivian domestic servants Precarious Dependencies, she uses voice to illustrate the complexity of the migration process for Aymaran women moving from the countryside to La Paz, the capital city. The conflict between urban life and rural life may represent the uneasy tension between tradition and modernity. For Aymaran women, fashion is a very visual statement of cultural positioning. The following words of Calderon describe the reactions of her friends and relatives when she chose to wear "white" clothes:

(After I quit work), I went directly to buy clothes. I bought a couple of skirts and sweaters, things like that. When my father saw me with these clothes on he immediately told me to change, and when my friends saw me walking around the neighbourhood in these clothes and with one pony

tail, they wouldn't even look at me. "Ah, Hilaria is de vestido", they said. "She thinks that she is better than we are." They told me that I looked like a white person. My face had turned white on the job, too, and after they criticized me, I had to rub dirt on my face so that I would become browner again (Gill, 1994: 108).

Again, the words of Calderon show that migration is not simply a geographical move. It is also a movement in identity. In this move, community may be both a site of support and a site which women may want to escape. In either case, the power dynamics are complex.

When powerlessness is presented as universal and pervasive, power may only be conceived as a "simple inversion of what exists" (Mohanty, 1991: 71). Thus, women in the informal sector would be "empowered" when their productive role would be supported. Although Bunster and Chaney utilize sweeping visions of powerlessness, they do introduce the notion that power may not be a "simple inversion" of the current situation. Similarly, Gill's presentation of the voice of Calderon illustrates that something as apparently simple as fashion (i.e. to even dress like the employer is to dress "white") is, in fact, an open and powerful defiance of Aymaran culture. Migration is, therefore, not always a reflection of a state of powerlessness.

When Bunster and Chaney asked Peruvian marketwomen if the fact that they are working gives them any power of decision in the household, most women believed that men



should take charge simply by virtue of their manhood:

- My husband, because he is the man and contributes more to the support of the house.
- Always it is the man who commands and decides.
- My husband - one cannot just do what one pleases.
- In my house, the husband is the boss (140).

Thus, by presenting the power dynamics of the household, Bunster and Chaney suggest that power gained in the productive sphere may not easily be transferred into other parts of life. When the domestic servants in the study were asked if they would ever like to be a patrona and have servants of their own, many did not aspire to such a position. Essentially, they did not see the idea of employing a servant as a sign of power:

Rosa: Even if I had the opportunity, I wouldn't have an empleada<sup>7</sup>. For what? Why do I need an empleada when I can take care of all my own things? (60)

Junna: No, I wouldn't like to be a patrona. It doesn't seem to me human to have an empleada and treat her like a little animal (59).

For Junna and Rosa, empowerment is not as simple as "servant" becoming "master". Unfortunately, in the work of Bunster and Chaney, we do not have access to any deeper ideas about these unreconciled sites of power. In general, Bunster and Chaney do not take the reader into these places. The vision of development which Bunster and Chaney promote is to "support and enhance the productive activities in which women are already engaged" (1). This vision serves to

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<sup>7</sup> employee, polite term for servant.

enhance a notion of development which values the productive. The overall affect is that other activities become less visible in the analysis as labour is given primacy (Hirshman, 1995).

Using a binary analytic to conceptualize power presumes that power divisions are "fundamental, undifferentiated and unilateral: there are oppressors who oppress victims" (Goetz, 1991: 142). The image of Peruvian marketwomen as victims is also enhanced by the motivation of the authors to universalize the experience of these women. Perhaps the greatest obstacle of this dualism is that "this produces as limiting and rigid picture of the oppressor as it does the victim" (Goetz, 1991: 142).

In confirming the oppression of Peruvian street sellers, Bunster and Chaney present the "tensions, harassment and problems they must endure". These women may suffer customer harassment:

I wish my customers would understand that we have to pay for electricity, water and food. And that some days we earn and others we don't. I wish they'd be more understanding of our plight and not complain against us at the municipality (106).

Moreover, they are also victims of police harassment:

The municipal police drive us like animals, they shout at us, confiscate our merchandise and don't allow us to sell in peace. If we express resentment they tell us to go and complain somewhere else. My fear is that one always has to be always on the move, feeling chased all the time and running away (100).

In Sellers and Servants one is acutely aware of

powerlessness. The victim "identity" is clearly emphasized. One must search more intensely for sites of power. On closer examination of the above quotations, it becomes apparent that the voices of the women do not speak the same words to different types of oppression. Emerging from the words are differences in the sites of power and powerlessness. For example, in the case of customer harassment, the woman envisions her powerlessness as lack of empathy. Similarly, the solution to her powerlessness may be found in the point at which her customer can relate to her suffering and to her identity. In the case of police harassment, the speaker feels displaced and "chased". Her powerlessness is both physical and mental.

Despite these hints at different experiences of powerlessness for street sellers, Bunster and Chaney choose to summarize powerlessness in this way:

Their lack of political clout as a group is due to the fact that they work in isolation and have no time to get involved in unions. Herein lies the reason for the powerlessness they feel as working mothers and their incapacity, so far, to focus jointly on solutions to vexing problems related to their small scale vending (117).

Bunster and Chaney end the chapter with this poignant answer to the question if given the chance again would you like to live as a man or as a woman?:

I would like to be born again as a man; they only have one thing to worry about- to bring money home- and that's all. Women have to look after the children, cook, wash, and work outside the home (118).

While the voices of women subtly subvert power dualisms, Bunster and Chaney textualize power to emphasize dualism. In the quotation above, the speaker conceives of power as existing in the male experience. The problem becomes that the experience of male-female relationships, as well as female-female relationships, are so scarcely examined in the text that this statement sits in isolation. It is used as a statement of universal female oppression. Power is then cast along a male/female dyad.

Carmen is a sixty-two year old Brazilian Black women whose life story appears in Patai's Brazilian Women Speak. She had worked various informal and formal sector jobs throughout her life. Here, she comments on the idea of a woman president:

What? If a woman were president (laughs)!!? She'd have to help us, wouldn't she? Because we're all women. We're the ones who know how much food costs, we know what's going on at home. The husband's off at work, and what's to eat? What can you give the kids at noon? What's left? Tell me. A woman knows; she goes into the kitchen, and she sees what's needed (Patai, 1988a: 184).

Carmen's reflections illustrate that she values the knowledge of women. Moreover, her comments suggest that while women are in an unequal position ("she'd have to help us"), women have a practical and necessary knowledge for survival ("a woman knows"). Thus, the voice of Carmen exposes that power may also be found in a position of subordination.

The image of a "powerful" female microentrepreneur is

largely absent in Sellers and Servants. She exists only as the fictive goal of development; as the woman awaiting to emerge from inside the seller and servant. Rudine Barriteau argues that female entrepreneurs are often excluded in research as "they do not fit the modal, low income woman" (Barriteau, 1995: 144). While a feminist analysis of the informal sector must locate sites of informal power, so too must it redefine sites of power.

In Brazilian Women Speak, Daphne Patai gathered the stories of three women in a chapter entitled "Entrepreneurs". Lucia, a woman in her mid forties who began as a domestic servant and eventually owned her own hair salon, is one of these entrepreneurs. Lucia's story is one of determination. She constantly reminds the reader that she is a "self made woman". Lucia does not consider herself a materialistic person, however, she does see in herself an ability to succeed:

It's so incredible because I had no one to care about me, to help me, only to destroy. And to be able to do all this, well, it takes a lot of drive to succeed. I've never been especially attached to money, to goods.....I can adapt...wherever I am adapt. I set up my furniture and my house, I set up my life and go on and on, and I feel fine. I have an easy time adapting, changing with life, it's impressive (Patai, 1988a: 323).

The words of Lucia are clear and strong. Her experience directly challenges the "victim" imagery which pervades informal sector analysis. She sees herself as unique. She values her abilities to "adapt" and "transform". However, in

commenting on the problems of her life journey she draws the reader away from her material existence to the separation from her husband:

My biggest problem wasn't...it wasn't having to sleep in the brush, as I told you, it wasn't being a farmworker, it wasn't being a maid, it wasn't working and living in my boss's house. My biggest problem was the separation, which involved litigation, the courts. And he..I felt like a thing..an object that belonged to him, and he didn't want to let me go because I was doing so well and he wasn't going to let go (Patai, 1988a: 322).

Lucia's reflections on her "problems" draws the reader out of the production paradigm. While she has worked hard all her life and can financially support herself, the legal process introduced a feeling of powerlessness. Again, Lucia's comments reify that one is neither a victim nor a businesswoman. In turn, power is not merely gained in the productive sphere.

A shifting away from the powerful/powerless dichotomy ultimately shifts one away from the equality/difference dichotomy. If power is understood as a set of relations and not as totalistic, an "image of women's 'difference' as a mark of equality" must be rejected (Elshtain, 1992: 123). Notions of informal/formal power divisions must also be rejected. The line between formal and informal sectors is not the line between power and powerlessness. Working as a petty vendor may allow for greater independence and flexibility than either factory work or a domestic situation (Bunster and Chaney, 1985: 93). Thus, it becomes important

to uncover sites of informal power to resist the tendency to associate women with "low productivity" and "backward attitudes- even fatalism" as reified in the developed/underdeveloped dichotomy (Goetz, 1991: 142).

### 3. To Be "In Between"

The identities of "seller" and of "servant" emerge as common labels in the discourse on women working in Latin America (see for example Babb, 1986; Babb, 1989; Otero, 1987). Bunster and Chaney react against the complete severing of these identities. As many women first work as domestics and then move on to street vending after the birth of their first child, these identities begin to blur. Moreover, similar to the work of Florence Babb in Peru (1986, 1989), the convergence of reproductive and productive roles is documented throughout their study. However, in the use of "voice", it is important to uncover how women conceptualize these blurring. Here a woman depicts the tension between her so-called "productive" and "reproductive" roles :

Sometimes I feel so tired and bored with everything. I work so hard and I do not sell and I'm there trying to sell all day and return home with nothing to feed my children. I go to the store and ask to buy food and pay later but the owner doesn't grant me credit. So I go home and cry aloud in anger and quarrel with my husband. Then he gets out of the house and gets drunk, comes home and shouts at me. For this reason we do not live happily nor is there any tenderness left for the children (Bunster and Chaney, 1987: 105).

Another woman makes little distinction between her "types" of work. She describes her day as a continuum of work:

One has to wake up and be there trying to sell all day and sometimes one does not sell a thing and ends up tired and has to go home to continue working (95).

Clearly, Bunster and Chaney consider the reproductive / productive dichotomy significant. What is less clear, however, is how this distinction is perceived by women working in Peru. The above quotations may evidence a blurring, but perhaps this blurring is imposed upon their comments. Again, as the sexual division of labour is assumed to be the key analytical concept, Bunster and Chaney "reduce the multifarious reality of 'women's being' to this single logic of production and labour" (Hirshman, 1995: 67).

The most popular view of women's participation in the informal sector argues that women are attracted to the informal sector because there exists the possibility to combine reproductive and productive tasks (see for example, Otero, 1987). Nena, a street seller, comments on this:

I felt very offended one day when an ignorant woman insulted me by crying out. "How can you be a placera (market woman)? Aren't you ashamed? It's almost like being a beggar, dragging your children with you." I calmed myself by thinking that this was the only occupation in which I could keep an eye on my children (Bunster and Chaney, 1986: 205).

Nena left factory work to do street selling to be with her children. Her words illustrate that she still feels some tension with this decision. In Nena's case, as in many



others, the combination of so-called reproductive/productive tasks is not as simple as it appears. Children may be at once reproductive and productive. The children of Peruvian street sellers actively participate in the selling of goods. Thus, it is not only women who combine tasks but children as well. Similarly, as women and children join together in selling, it is the productive role which dominates life. Nena is not entirely happy with her role as mother for her daughter Lupe:

It saddens me to realize that Lupe is not really leading the life of a child because she doesn't have time to play and enjoy herself more. It makes me unhappy that I don't have the time nor the money to take her to a park, to the movies, or to a place where she'd have lots of fun (Bunster and Chaney, 1985: 205).

In some cases of informal work, the ability to combine tasks is made nearly impossible. Bunster and Chaney document that for most domestic workers having children is problematic and in some cases prohibited by their patronas. Thus, a marriage may signify a necessary move from domestic work. An unnamed woman in Cecilia Blondet's study urges a woman to get married: "Sister, get married. What would you rather be- a slave for those shameful people or a slave in your own home?" (1990: 25). In these instances, women may either make a choice to leave productive work or be forced to leave. While women may be attracted to market selling or domestic work for the opportunity to balance the demands to their family and to work, it is a difficult balancing act. Carmen,

a sixty-year old woman who worked as a laundress for a good part of her life , warned in Patai's Brazilian Women Speak (1988a) that children make life more difficult: "Don't get pregnant, it's so hard with a baby. Wait a while, till things get better, then have one or two" (182).

Thus, in the examination of the reproductive/productive blurring, one becomes aware of the material discursiveness of informal work.<sup>22</sup> Informal sector work intersects with so-called formal work and reproductive work and these intersections are constantly shifting. The life stories in Brazilian Women Speak illustrate that women throughout their lives move in and out of informal work - both out of necessity and of choice. This shifting may not be characterized as a movement up in either the economic hierarchy or power hierarchy. Pilar, a migrant to Peru, explains her decision making process in deciding whether to do domestic or factory work:

Well, I wasn't sure. I had always dreamed of working in a factory because you have Saturdays off and every Sunday. But in this other sort of work you only got a rest every fortnight. Then I said to myself that it was better at least be sure of getting my meals, so I'll try my luck in this, and I accepted it (Blondet, 1990: 23).

The shifting of women in and out of the so-called informal sector is perhaps the most significant challenge to traditional informal sector models which posits the sector

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<sup>22</sup> This idea of "material discursiveness" was developed in conversation with Jane Parpart.

as a "catch-all" for those seeking employment. So too is it a challenge to the victim characterization as the shifting is often governed by the women themselves.

All of the example texts which discussed domestic work openly resist a traditional/modern conceptualization. They react against the classical framework- based on the experience of Western capitalist economies - that posits domestic service as both a "modernizing agent" and as a "bridging occupation". Bunster and Chaney state that they do not label the women of the study as "transitional" on their way to becoming "modern" (23,24).

Linda Seligman, in her study of Peruvian "cholas" marketwomen, suggested that to be "in between" two competing ways of living - that of peasantry and capitalism - is the crux of their existence:

Within Peruvian society, the cholas are members of an imposed social category, whose historical antecedents lie in the establishment of Spanish colonial caste system; they also belong to a constructed social category that all Peruvians consciously manipulate. The definition of the social category of chola can only be arrived at contextually and situationally with respect to other socially created categories such as indio and mestizo (1989: 718).

Peruvian marketwomen, and many other informal workers, are "in between" many structured binarisms. Thus far, much of informal sector analysis has focused on clarifying these distinctions rather than entering this uncomfortable "in between" existence. Bunster and Chaney's Sellers and Servants, in particular, falls prey to this tendency. It is

this borderland which is absent in their analysis and absent in their re-presentation of voice.

#### 4. The Struggle in the Text

A researcher must interpret, present and organize voice in a way that she believes sends meaning." In the case of the informal sector, part of this process is to place voice in a larger context of material power. However, another important aspect of this process is to place voice in the larger context of textual power. Claudia Salazar warns that "we must be careful not to overlook the "worldliness" of the struggles waged through and in discursive spaces" (1991: 93). In these struggles silences, word choice and punctuation become extremely significant. It is these sites which then become the point of analysis.

When and where voice emerges in the text is the choice of the author alone. Thus, meaning is automatically assigned to these voices by the author. This meaning is usually summarized in the introductory sentence. At one point in their text, Bunster and Chaney discuss the fact that domestic servants have limited friendships. They suggest that this is due to a:

..most often definite policy on the part of the interviewees themselves, a conscious decision not to cultivate friendships because it is dangerous to do so, rather than because of the lack of

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" It is evident that I too have used voice in this way. Thus, I am subject to my own critiques.

opportunity to do so (60).

This sentence then serves as introduction to a series of quotations. Among these quotes are:

Mercedes: I don't have any friendships, and I have always been like that wherever I've worked - very far from making friends. My mother always said that friends could induce one to make a wrong turn, or advise one badly. If you go through life alone, you can take better care of yourself.

Eusebia: I don't have any friends, because I don't have confidence in anyone. Not anyone. Not even in my own shadow!

Juana: I don't have friends at work. The empleadas gossip with the patrona and play up to her. I don't like to join in this adulation. I think everyone should stay in her place, and win appreciation through one's work (61).

Although, Mercedes seems to parallel the analysis of the authors. The statements of Eusebia and Juana challenge this analysis. Is , for example, Eusebia "consciously" avoiding friendships? The introductory sentence serves to lead the reader. The statements are then positioned as evidence to the analysis. We seek out the commonalities of voice; the proof of general assumptions. The framing of voice is inevitable in the text, in fact, one could argue that it is the aim of the analysis. However, it is this framing that is evidence to the means in which voice can be silenced or represented.

Ultimately, it is the feminist framework of the authors themselves which will control the use of experience in the text. The choice of representing identity is inevitably a political one. The goal of Bunster and Chaney's study, in

their own words, is to "approach the problems from the perspectives of the women themselves" (15). However, in the goal to reveal the experience of women, this experience is used as "uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation" (Scott, 1992: 24). Their discourse shapes the very experience which they seek to explain. It is then dependant upon the reader to seek out the places where voice contradicts, challenges and reshapes the re-presentation of experience.

In conducting the interviews for Precarious Dependencies, Lesley Gill states that she did not hear a distinct "woman's voice". Instead, the stories reflected what she described as the "disparate", "ambiguous" and even "contradictory" experiences of women working as domestic workers (1994: 12-13). As she interviewed both employers and domestic workers, these changing accounts also reify the complexity of employer-servant relationships.

In her use of the voices of Bolivian women, Gill makes an effort to seek and present these contradictions in both subtle and obvious ways. Gill uses the statements of Nora Vasquez to illustrate the ambiguity and complexities of Aymaran culture. Vasquez, of Aymaran ancestry herself, chooses to buy "de vestido" clothing (i.e. a blouse and skirt, or a dress) for her servant Manuela rather than the traditional Aymaran pollera. She explains her reasons for this:

Of course, I like the pollera, but it is more expensive because you also need a shawl, a hat, shoes everything. To be 'de vestido' you just combine a blouse and a skirt and it costs less. I also want Manuela to speak Spanish well and not be so Aymara and that is why I send her to night school (Gill, 1994: 118).

In further comments, however, it is revealed that Vasquez does not dismiss the pollera as backward or "less modern". Instead, she wears a pollera to appear elegant and sophisticated:

We (cholas pacenas) make fun of them. We say, what is a dress? A dress is nothing more than a skirt and a blouse. But when we get dressed up, it's a question of a lot of money. We're not just anyone. I cook for all of La Paz society (Gill, 1994: 119).

The seemingly contradictory thoughts of Vasquez subvert notions of culture which are cast along the backward/modern binarism. Gill, in her use of voice, shows how Aymaran women are constantly reshaped and manipulated. She concludes:

Because the subaltern forms of femineity created by Aymara women pose an alternative to dominant concepts of feminine morality and beauty, they are constantly manipulated, marginalized, and appropriated by dominant groups who have a vested interest in conserving the symbols of their power (Gill, 1994: 148).

Gill's study is therefore an important analysis of how dominant concepts may conceal the intricacies of identity. By utilizing the voices of women, she makes space for the "subaltern" in recasting their own representation.

The central goal of Cecilia Blondet's study is to use the voices of women to map out the migration process. Her title, "Establishing an Identity: Women Settlers in A Poor

Lima Neighbourhood", illustrates that she believes the migration process is a critical part of identity formation. The identities which she presents are multilayered and include cultural, social and political aspects. In this sense, she does not privilege the production paradigm in her analysis. Nonetheless, Blondet uses experience as an uncontested site. While professing the complexity of the migration process, the end product of the process is unified into the "new social identity " of "urban inhabitants" (1990: 44). She argues that two factors are crucial: traditional clientelism and the family-domestic unit. While openly claiming the "complexity" and "ambiguity" of the life transitions, the end result is uniformly casted as a transition from the "individual to the collective" and "from clientelism to family autonomy" (Blondet, 1990: 44).

Daphne Patai attempts a less selective presentation of voice in her use of life stories: "It is misguided, I believe, to ask of a life story , 'What is the point'? Our task is to attend to the story in such a way that we move beyond this question" (1988a: 1). She presents various women's subjective experiences told in the narrative form of the life story. She avoids preconceived and dominant viewings of these realities in order to refrain from turning Brazilian women into "manifestations of a culture already posited as a given" (1988a: 10). In this way, the life stories are presented with "vividness and immediacy" and



"let us see, or in effect hear, for ourselves" (Patai, 1988a: 17).

Patai's life stories present voices without an "agenda of proof". Experience is not used as a validation of a particular analytic. In this sense, she attempts to limit the interference and control of herself as author. She used a "speaker centred approach" in selecting and organizing the life stories. By listening, noting repetition, emphasis and features selected by the speaker -she "developed a sense of what mattered" to the speaker (Patai, 1988a: 10). This open environment allows for a "wandering of voice". In the life story of Maria Helena, a seventy year old mother of five who had raised her family by sewing out of her home, comments on friendships led into a discussion of abortion, then to a discussion of her relationship with her daughter, and finally to a commentary on the current president. The speaker is given the opportunity to control the path of the dialogue.

The life stories in Patai's text are gathered into various chapters and each is introduced with a brief factual description of the woman. However, the stories sit in relative isolation to each other and none are accompanied by an analysis- economic, social, cultural or otherwise. However, Patai herself contends that "our acts of criticism and analysis honour and ennoble texts, as well as illuminate them" (1988a: 34). Why then does she not take on the

position of critic or analyst? Obviously, the central goal of Patai's study is to deliver voice. In this deliverance, she uses the introduction to discuss the ways in which voice is co-opted by dominant social paradigms but then leaves the reader the task of assessment and analysis. It is a unique form of research.

However, as Susan Geiger contends, there is nothing inherently feminist about doing women's oral history: "It only becomes a feminist methodology if its use is systematized in particular feminist ways and if the objectives for collecting the oral data are feminist" (1990: 306). Patai meets Geiger's qualifications for a feminist oral history, nonetheless, Patai cannot control how these voices will be used or by whom. Clearly, it is possible that these voices could be used to support a patriarchal agenda. Similarly, voices in isolation are "privileged" as they are not directly in dialogue with other versions of the "truth". Ironically then, voice which is encapsulated within theoretical boundaries may be more protected from co-option.

Perhaps Patai's guard against such a move is to use gender as the collective element in all the stories. However, she does not "ignore the fact that gender does not have a voice; women and men do". Patai chooses a particular role in deconstruction: she "creates a space for a new voice" and then "steps aside" (Brown, 1991: 89,90). What we "do" with the voices which Patai presents, is then largely

up to us. To "do" nothing, however, is equivalent to using these voices as affirmations of our own social paradigms. In either case, we engage in a project of silencing voices.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS - Can We Hear?

Voice does have the potential to both transform "objects" into "subjects", and to "transform the very nature of subjectivity" (Gugelberger and Kearney, 1991: 8). However, as evidenced in the various example texts, this transformatory potential is dependent on several factors. One of these central factors is the use of experience itself. If experience is used as proof of subjectivity, then the accompanying tendency is to prove the economic subordination of women in the informal sector. In turn, we learn more about the theories of capitalist accumulation than about the women who are experiencing this situation (Ong, 1994).

In reality, the diminishing of difference serves to reinforce the polarization of "self" and "other". By portraying women as interchangeable, as evident in the text Sellers and Servants, the cultural superiority of women in the West is reified. In the use of a powerful/powerless dyad, Bunster and Chaney use Western "measurements" of oppression to judge which women are "more oppressed" (Ong, 1994). In turn, marginality is too imposed. The subjects of Sellers and Servants become representatives of an a priori

established condition of marginality. This positioning automatically "privileges certain voices and obstructs others through the very framework imposed" (Geiger, 1990: 309).

The material reality of the subject cannot be in competition with other aspects of the subject, nor can "any aspect be given, in the abstract, greater epistemological significance" (Barret, 1992: 213). The present analysis examined the voices of particular women because they shared a certain economic situation: all worked or had worked in informal labour. We cannot, however, make assumptions about the sameness of the experience. Nor can we assume that these alternative narratives are "either totally dependent on and determined by a dominant narrative", or conversely, that they "exist as isolated autonomous narratives, untouched in their essence by dominant figurations" (Mohanty, 1992). Thus, we are not solely interested in narratives which challenge metanarrative versions of truth, but in addition, we are also interested in mapping out the governing of this truths. The path to liberation of the "dominated subject is precisely in its contradictions, its specific structurations" (Chow, 1989: 57).

The analysis of the various texts introduced a complex blurring of the reproductive/productive binarism, of the line between informal and formal sectors, and a challenging of the primacy of the sexual division of labour. This

conclusion could be used to support a reconceptualization of the terms. Similarly, one could argue that the blurring are so excessive that the distinction is in fact lost. However, either conclusion is somewhat premature. The essential finding of the analysis is that the method itself is flawed. We need to begin with a critical examination of labour itself and to ask further questions as to why certain assumptions about women's labour are "integral to the androcentric practice of development" (Hirshman, 1995: 52). We need to understand what it is like to live "in between" these terms, and in turn, how this existence reconceptualizes the terms themselves. Ultimately, this takes us back to examining the use of experience.

The analysis revealed that the struggle in the text is an important one. While some feminists are apprehensive of the "linguistic turn" of feminism, others consider "words and things" to be inextricably linked (Barret, 1992). Daphne Patai urges the readers of Brazilian Women Speak to look at the literariness of oral life stories. In this move, she suggests, that "What we see, finally, is that we are in the presence of someone creatively using that specifically human instrument: language " (Patai, 1988a: 20). To fictionalize, even the metanarratives of marxism and capitalism, is "not to pose a crude antithesis between "politics" and "fiction", but instead, it is "to remark on how helpful many have found it to use a metaphorical fictionalizing as a critical tool

for unlocking the objectivist pretensions of things like rationality, the Enlightenment, or even feminism" (Barret, 1992: 205). To take an analysis to the level of language is not to apoliticize a struggle, rather, it is to call attention to the density of the sounds of a narrative and to demand that no story is transparent (Patai, 1988a: 34).

How then does one govern the interaction of analysis of the informal sector and of voice? As suggested by Susan Gal (1991), there is much symbolic interaction at play in the space between speech and silence. We cannot therefore polarize Patai's presentation of less unadulterated voices against Bunster and Chaney's use of selected voice. Neither is completely free of the affects of power dynamics. We can begin, however, to examine how voice is acted upon and to determine who these actors are. Similarly, in our own research we can put "conversation in a context which makes evident its dialogue with so many others" (Brown, 1991: 85).

## CONCLUSIONS: Beyond Dichotomies

### The Relevance of the Formal/Informal Sector Dichotomy

Mitu Hirshman poses the important question as to whether we should "dislodge" or "extend" concepts which "repress, distort and obscure many aspects of women's existence" (Hirshman, 1995: 50). The term "informal sector" has served to both ignore and distort women's experience. How then should we use this term? Lisa Peattie considers it is inherently a "fuzzy" term for an "untidy reality", and suggests that its continued usage could actually be "counterproductive". Similarly, she believes that a structural analysis of the term is inappropriate:

The "informal sector" is a category identifiable in terms of enterprise or firm size and mode of organization; to derive from this category a structural analysis can only be done by imputing to the fuzzy category the economic functions which it is the job of the analysis to identify. Circular reasoning is the result (1987: 858).

Peattie argues that the pursuit of a definition of the informal sector should be bypassed so "we can get on to something a little more interesting" (1987: 858).

Conversely, Portes and Schauffler, see the desire to pursue an accurate and meaningful understanding of the term as both a worthwhile and necessary pursuit. Hence, they do not advocate a complete abandoning of the term. Instead, they strongly defend the structuralist approach. "Only through a combination of measures grounded on the social

dynamics of the informal sector", they argue, "can the energies and entrepreneurial potential of its members be realized" (1993: 56). Thus, Portes and Schauffler advocate a definition which gives justice to the complexity of the sector. However, they view a clarity of definition as necessary to promote a "transformation of subsistence activities into dynamic autonomous small firms" (1993: 56). While they advocate a complexity in structural features in the informal sector, by assuming the inherent entrepreneurial nature of those involved in informal sector labour, they do not accept a heterogeneity in outcome. The correct policies will transform all into entrepreneurs.

Both of these positions provide "alternatives" to current conceptualizations. While Peattie "dislodges", and Portes and Schauffler "extend" conceptualizations, there is a similarity in their projects. These modifications search for "development alternatives". A postmodern analysis, however, introduces "alternatives to development" (Escobar, 1992). The very paradigm which forms development discourse - the liberal discourse on the market - is brought into question. Postmodernism asks very different questions about the informal sector as compared to previous analyses. In coming to a conclusion(s), therefore, we must assess whether postmodernist thinking "dislodges" or "extends" the concept of the informal sector. And more importantly - are postmodern "answers" to the limitations of current



conceptualizations valid, and in turn, useful to the policy and practice of development?

### 1. The "Fuzzy" Informal Sector

The postmodern position, in its emphasis on the inadequacies of metanarratives and its "rejection of universal, simplified definitions of social phenomena" (Parpart and Marchand, 1995: 4), fits seemingly well with Peattie's rejection of the term. However, it is precisely the term's "fuzziness" which Peattie, and others, reject. A fuzziness which she believes a more institutional economic analysis will lessen. A postmodernist analysis, however, would not reject the term on the basis of its inherent "fuzziness" as any attempt to define reality would be expected to be "fuzzy". While the two approaches may coincide in the argument that the term does not capture any "truth", postmodernism would hold that any comprehension of the "truth" will be limited by subjectivity and experience (Parpart and Marchand, 1995). The terms "fuzziness" should not devalue its use in analysis.

In adopting a postmodern critique, however, we need not abandon attempts to understand the informal sector. As Judith Butler contends "to call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it; rather, it is to free it up from its metaphysical lodgings in order to occupy and to serve very different political aims" (1992:

17). In the movement towards understanding the informal sector, "broad generalizations should be rejected" and a more "local, specific and historically informed analyses" should be built (Parpart and Marchand, 1995).

The informal sector is - as Peattie suggests - an "untidy reality". The notion that the informal sector is difficult to qualify is not a new idea. The literature on the informal sector has always grappled with a notion of heterogeneity (see for example Moser, 1981; Dick and Rimmer, 1980). It is quite clear that there is much heterogeneity in informal types of employment. For women, informal jobs can vary from market selling, to domestic service, to industrial homework.

This type of heterogeneity supports some rejection of the informal/formal dichotomy. Alison MacEwen Scott, for example, argues that it is best to conceptualize the informal/formal relationship as a polarization rather than as a dualism. That is, there is a "continuum rather than an abrupt discontinuity between the opposite poles" (Scott, 1991: 106). However, it is the poles which define themselves. And it turn, a definition of the pole of "informality" is in opposition, and inferior to, to the pole of "formality". Similarly, in the literature, heterogeneity largely refers to economic heterogeneity. To a large extent, it was the realization that not all economic activities in the informal sector were subsistence activities which

motivated a theoretical trend towards heterogeneity (see particularly Tokman, 1989). Thus, heterogeneity is again defined by a comparison to formal activities.

As concluded in Chapter Two, the central definitional crisis of the informal sector literature has been whether the informal sector refers to an economic structure itself or to those employed in it. This crisis has not been resolved. Individual focused perspectives, while having the potential to create a more complex analysis, have been particularly limited. When subjects surface in the discourse they are usually characterized as either victims or microentrepreneurs. If the informal sector is considered to be a site of survival, then the subjects become survivalists. Conversely, if the informal sector is the site of small business, the subjects become microentrepreneurs. In this sense, the individual focused analysis is largely shaped by the informal/formal (read powerful/powerless) economic dichotomy. Individuals whom are involved in labour forms which are closest to formal definitions of employment, typically microentrepreneurs, are characterized as more powerful. Implicit in this assumption is the use of equality as a measure of power; the more "like" the employment is to formal definitions, the more powerful. At the essence of such a dynamic rests the assumption that development policy has the transformatory potential to mould and form identity. With the proper development package, "the entrepreneurial

potential" of the members of the informal sector can be "realized" (Portes and Schauffler, 1993: 56).

The imposed subjectivity of informal sector analysis parallels critiques of development discourse which argue that people of the South are re-presented as the "other". As the informal sector is typically discussed as a non-Western phenomena, so too do those in this sector become typified as non-Western, and hence, the "other". In this sense, individual analyses, remained mired in economic dualisms. The "powerful" microentrepreneur identity, despite its seemingly open challenging of the victim characterization, is also imposed. Within the WID discourse particularly, the female microentrepreneurs become the subjects of the success story of neoliberalism.

Despite the tendencies of individual analyses to escape the use of a subject, this type of analysis may hold some promise for forming alternative conceptualizations of informality. By focusing on the experience of informality as a contingent and discursive site, we may begin to understand what life in the informal sector is actually like. How does this "way of doing things" - to borrow Keith Hart's (1972) phrase- inform and form identity?

While the application of the formal/informal dualism to women's labour revealed that the dynamic fundamentally ignores issues of gender, much of feminist analyses did not challenge the modernist, economic basis of the dichotomy.

The "case" of women is often used to illustrate how they are "totally determined and dependant on the dominant narrative" (Mohanty, 1992: 84). The informal/formal dualism in its reification of the powerful/powerless dichotomy can account for women being both microentrepreneurs and victims. Women are more often given victim status because they are connected to parts of the informal sector which are "less entrepreneurial", and because this victim status permeates gender and development writing. The classification of women as victims and as microentrepreneurs, however, is based on male biased understandings of this sector. Women's involvement is governed by a complex set of factor which are often not the standard factors which are utilized in the informal model. Essentially, the model can account for gender factors but is not gendered.

Standard understandings and applications of the analytical concept of the sexual division of labour cannot be easily assumed in the case of women in the informal sector. The line between reproductive and productive tasks, for example, is consistently blurred. It is blurred by the involvement of children in so-called productive labour, by the "combination" of reproductive and productive tasks, and by the use of traditional reproductive tasks as productive labour. The use of reproduction and production as oppositional categories ignores the "in between" existence of women's informal involvement.

Thus, we can make several conclusions about the informal/formal dichotomy. First, the informal/formal dichotomy has been greatly influenced by a distinction between so-called "backward" and "modern" forms of economic activities. This tendency, in turn, affects how the individuals involved in this sector become typified. Individual focused analyses have, thus far, not made substantive change in challenging these characterizations as they too are trapped in the dualism. Nonetheless, it is this type of analysis which hold the most promise for transforming the informal model into a more nuanced theory as the subjects of analysis and their experience may be utilized.

Second, feminist analysis has challenged existing understandings of the informal/formal dualism by suggesting that the dynamic does not apply to the case of women. However, in remaining mired in the production paradigm, these analyses have tended to confirm the dualism rather than to challenge it. In particular, many studies have supported the notion of women of the South as "other" by connecting women to informal sector employment without challenging the inherently modernist and liberalist basis of definitions of informality and formality. Thus, the centrality of concepts like the sexual division of labour are not seriously interrogated.

And finally, we can conclude that there is something

"different" about the experience of informal existence. We should not, therefore, abandon this concept entirely. Rather, we should use this site- in the words of Chandra Mohanty - as a site of "insistent, simultaneous, non-synchronous" processes. The informal sector must become a site where experience can be historically interpreted and where it is continually mapped and transformed (Mohanty, 1992: 88,89). One could argue that women's "in between" nature has been created by the use of various dualisms. However, Chapter three revealed that life in the informal sector is a shifting, discursive experience. We need to know more about how these shiftings are governed and how this unique existence inscribes identity.

## 2. Voice and the Informal Sector

The analysis of the various texts in the third chapter revealed that voice can be a powerful tool in subverting and challenging dominant conceptualizations of the informal/formal dualism. These "voices" illustrated that this dualism does not parallel a powerful/powerless dichotomy. The analysis suggested that :

Reversals and the valorization of that which was marginalized proffer short-term satisfaction but little by way of concrete, political engagement and an incitement to social change and commitment. Instead, grappling with those powerful terms of political discourse that necessarily define politics in the west is an unavoidable task (Elshtain, 1992: 124).

In the continued representation of women as victims, it

becomes difficult to imagine powerlessness as governed by anything other than economic relations. Further, powerlessness becomes something that is always imposed, and power something taken. As women spoke of their experience, it became apparent that they did not envision a transition from informal to formal employment to be a transition in power. While they spoke of the hardships of being a woman, they also spoke of the ways in which their power shifted and changed because of their identity as women.

While the content of the voices challenged representations of the informal sector, it is equally important to interrogate how these representations are governed and by whom. In the attempt to make women of the informal sector subjects of the discourse about them, it is evident that voice cannot be simply weighed against silence. An emphasis on language is itself a Western tradition. Language and silence are both culturally defined. In different cultures, some forms of communication may be more highly valued than others:

Resistance to a dominant cultural order occurs when devalued linguistic strategies and genres are practised and celebrated despite widespread denigration; it occurs as well when these devalued practices propose or embody alternate models of the social world (Gal, 1991:177).

The complexities of the control of voice need to be given due attention. While we must "awaken sensitivity to the ways in which even feminist language can be implicated in the



processes of cultural domination", this does not mean, however, that "there are simple measures to prevent such domination from reappearing in even a qualified discourse" (Nicholson, 1992: 67). There is a need to "situate women's voices/experiences in the specific , historical, spatial and social contexts within which women live and work" (Parpart and Marchand, 1995: 18). In the case of the informal sector, women's "position" of informality contributes to identity formation. This identity is an "interaction" , an "interpretation", and a "reconstruction" of an environment (Barriteau, 1995: 151). The result of this relationship is a changing and fluid subjectivity, which even the "position" of informality cannot contain.

The DAWN group (Development Alternatives for Women For A New Era) has continuously argued that alternative development agendas need to be grounded in the experience of poor women (see for example Sen and Grown, 1987). This argument makes a valid statement about the necessity to make space for unheard voices. Nonetheless, the voices which need to be heard are not always readily apparent. As in the case of domestic service, the voices of both employers and servants added to the understanding of the dynamics of this experience. There are many voices which are necessary to the reformulation of the discourse. To only value the experience of poverty, is to give analytic primacy to the sexual division of labour (Hirshman, 1995).

The act of giving voice is deeply impacted upon by our assumptions about the role of experience. Bunster and Chaney, for example, in their text Sellers and Servants privileged voices which illustrated the "seller" and "servant" identities. They used experience as primarily governed by the dynamics of production, and in turn, selected voices which spoke about this central dynamic. Daphne Patai, conversely, was much less selective in the use of voice. Nonetheless, as she acknowledges, by presenting oral history uncritically and unsituated, she too privileges these accounts of the "truth".

The analysis highlighted the importance of the struggle in the text. While many feminists are apprehensive of the "linguistic turn" of analysis, serious wars are being waged through language. When voice is utilized, the author decides when and where the subject will speak. This profoundly affects the dialogue. Thus, as researchers, our role is to make evident these spontaneous and endless dialogues, both to ourselves and to the reader.

### 3. The Implications of a Postmodern Approach

Postmodernism makes several unique contributions to the analysis of the informal sector. First, it reveals how the discourse has been profoundly shaped by various dualisms, and how in turn, subjects have been positioned in these dualisms. Second, it evidences the effects of the liberal

modernist discourse on markets in framing the informal analysis. Although, this influence has been discussed in the counter discourses such as the dependency school (Udayagiri, 1995), postmodern perspectives elucidate how modernist, Enlightenment assumptions permeate all of development thinking, including the counter discourses.

It would be a rather limited conclusion to simply say that postmodernist analysis reveals that the informal sector conceptualization is exclusionary of the experiences of women. This has been done elsewhere (see particularly Feldman, 1991). Perhaps the most innovative and useful addition of a postmodern analysis is its interrogation of experience and subjectivity itself. While questions about what "types" of experience should be included in informal analysis are important, it becomes increasingly apparent that we need to examine the use of experience itself. This question forces us to examine the very role of experience in the epistemological foundations of gender and development theory. Rather than using experiential knowledge as a contradiction of or a validation of theory, it can instead, illustrate the multiple and shifting nature of women's lives (Barriteau, 1995). This analysis is particularly useful to anyone attempting to use voice in analysis.

There are parts of a postmodernist perspective, albeit in their extremes, which would sit uncomfortably positioned within a feminist analysis of the informal sector. First, to

embrace the position - which is often connected with postmodernism- that the metanarrative of materialism should be entirely displaced, would neglect serious issues of poverty. The interaction of materialism and postmodernism demands an important place in any debate of the relevance of postmodernism to the informal sector discourse. As suggested by Moira Gatens, "gender is the material effect of the way in which power takes hold of the body rather than an ideological effect of the way power 'conditions' the mind" (1992: 127). To assume, therefore, that materialism is an operational construct, is to ignore the ways in which both the body and the mind are materially constituted.

Second, it is often argued that textual deconstruction is the only critical struggle of postmodernism. Mridula Udayagiri, for example, argues that textual analysis itself can create a "disjunction between 'their' lives and 'our lives' " (1995:166). Maria Nzomo argues that textual analysis must have "practical applicability to actual rather than abstract situations" (1995:133). In much of the postmodern textual analysis, however, there is an assumed importance of social and political struggle outside of - and indeed, because of - textual representation. Clearly, the challenge before postmodern analysis is to make more direct links between this textual analysis and the problems of poverty and oppression at the level of policy and practice. Although, this task is fraught with obstacles, as evidenced

in the practice of development in general, it is a necessary pursuit.

Postmodernism is attacked for its seemingly limitless jargon and has been charged with being inaccessible to women of the South. Beverley and Oviedo maintain that :

There is something about the very idea of a Latin American postmodernism that makes one think of that condition of colonial or neocolonial dependency in which goods that have become shopworn out of fashion in the metropolis are, like the marvels of the gypsies in One Hundred Years of Solitude, exported to the periphery, where they enjoy a profitable second life (1993: 2).

In the production of alternative analyses, we should be wary of the risk that women of the South "will be represented as mired in it, ever arriving at modernity, when Western feminists are already adrift in postmodernism" (Ong, 1994). 377). Such a trend will reify the traditional/modern dualism which postmodernism attempts to dislodge. However, analyses from the South have drawn on aspects of postmodernism without simply accepting it as a wholesale "product". The postmodern debate is not an advancement beyond modernity and its associated discourses, but rather, an active engagement with modernity and its influence in the North and the South.

And finally, much has been made of the fragmented subject as leading to political nihilism. It appears, however, that the informal subject is fragmented and discursive. How then do we envision a political action in this sector which takes into account this discursiveness?

This is a difficult question. We can begin to answer this through a further interrogation of the sites of power in the informal sector. In reflecting on the subversion of the powerful/powerless dualism it becomes apparent that "if at least partial exclusion from wholesale absorption into the terms of institutional power is maintained, space for critical reflection and challenge to that power is more likely to be sustained " (Elshtain, 1992: 119). As Elshtain suggests, the exclusion from formal power does not necessarily entail powerlessness. Similarly, while a decentred, discursive subject is not a traditional political actor, this fractured identity need not be political paralysed in the face of oppression - be it centralised or decentralised.

In claiming a "postmodern reality" , we should not neglect the very real effects of modernity on the lives of women of the South and in the North (Beverly and Ovedio, 1993). Nor however, should we label postmodernism as a simple "disenchantment" with modernity (Lechner, 1993); as "no more than modernity reflecting on itself and explaining its unresolved conflicts" (Hopenhayn, 1993: 93). Postmodernism is an engagement with difference. It holds real promise for an informal sector discourse which is created "for" and "by" women of the South. Just as women of the South have been re-presented as helpless victims which require the assistance of Northern expertise, so too have

they been re-presented as successful microentrepreneurs. This is a rather dangerous finding as it illustrates that images can be manipulated according to the framework of the dominant discourse. Thus, envisioning development as a "necessary" process is equally as harmful as envisioning it as already happened.

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