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## Editor's Note

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

"Conditions are horrendous to such an extent that even the women are leaving." So spoke a young man in an interview I conducted, in the summer of 1992, among Somali refugees in neighboring Djibouti who fled from the bloody implosion of the Somali state. This statement crystallizes what women in many parts of the world had been and *are* up against. More emphatically, while the Somali's utterance may give a glimpse of an extremely gendered cultural moment, there is barely any society in which women's biology is not drafted to define their location in structures and commensurate rewards. In her most recent work, Martha Nussbaum opens with an encompassing but sobering assertion. It is well worth quoting in length:

Women in much of the world lack support for fundamental functions of human life. They are less well nourished than men, less healthy, more vulnerable to physical violence and sexual abuse. They are much less likely than men to be literate, and still less likely to have preprofessional technical education. Should they attempt to enter the workplace, they face greater obstacles, including intimidation from family or spouse, sex discrimination in hiring, and sexual harassment in the workplace—all, frequently, without effective legal recourse. Similar obstacles often impede their effective participation in political life. In many nations women are not full equals under the law; they do not have the same property rights as men, the same rights to make a contract, the same rights of association, mobility, and religious liberty. Burdened, often, with the "double day" of taxing employment and full responsibility for housework and childcare, they lack opportunities for play and for the cultivation of their imaginative and cognitive faculties. All these factors take their toll on emotional well-being. . . . In all these ways, unequal social and political circumstances give women unequal human capabilities.<sup>1</sup>

Even when the diversity of circumstances created by uneven development is taken into account, Nussbaum is correct in her general estimation. Let's for a second focus on two realities quite distant from each other—the United States and Africa. After more than three decades of righteous campaigns, nourished by earlier struggles for suffrage and other rights, the women's movement in the United States has won a number of crucial battles in the sphere of civil rights. Relatively much progress has been made in the workplace, home, political, and cultural

space and other institutions of society. But, here too, regressive attitudes that concretely and directly impinge on the integrity and well-being of women are evident. From the family and personal life to income and professional and career development, old patriarchal narratives and new versions of domesticity contest with the surge of liberatory feminist agendas. For instance, on one side is the combination of the deadly perspectives of domestic violence, inadequate day care, and renewed religious and political ambitions to drastically redefine and, therefore, reduce women's autonomy. On the other is an intensification but continual discounting of their labor coupled with a resistant glass ceiling. The first is best illustrated by the foreboding contention over reproductive rights; the latter is exemplified by severe inequality in wages. For instance, in compensation, despite having the same university qualifications, 4 percent of women earn incomes of over \$75,000 in contrast to 17 percent among American men. Even in the academy, the gender gap is telling. In a 1999 study of the profile of scientists and engineers in universities and four-year colleges, the National Science Foundation found that men constituted the overwhelming majority of all the professorial ranks, with the imbalance between the sexes greater in the higher categories. Median salaries within the ranks were also gender discrepant.<sup>2</sup>

In the African milieu, the burden of inequality takes many forms, some generically identical with those faced by many women in the United States. Perhaps most widespread, however, are inequitable access to resources, including food; social exclusion; and insecurity—factors that directly enervate the continent's potential.

African women work for longer hours than African men. On average, their workdays may be 50 percent longer, and their work is closely integrated with household production systems. . . . Women farmers receive only 1 percent of total credit to agriculture. Women are less likely to control the product of their labor than men, reducing their incentives to pursue productive, income-earning opportunities. And between 1960–1990 average schooling for African women increased by only 1.2 years, the lowest gain of any region. Some cross-country studies suggest that if African women were given equal access to education and productive factors, growth rates could be as much as 0.8 percentage points higher. . . . Thus Africa is losing out on the productive potential of more than half its effective workforce.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the zone of the world, at the heart of the gender *problematique* is the perennial question of power.<sup>4</sup> Fundamentally, power is a relationship that comes in a variety of guises and situations. In a broad sense, one could discern at least three types of power, each associated with a specific modality of compliance and actualization: physical, material, and cultural. The first is the most direct and blunt. Whether it is the threat or actual use of violence, such a relationship premised on the possible or literal damage or even annihilation, as Thomas Hobbes elucidated centuries ago, is the salient feature in political order. Material power connotes access to or, more precisely, denial of sources of livelihood — the means for the daily reproduction of existence. Elementally, the intimidation of hunger lies at the core of this context but, of course, the pursuit of utility in an environment overdriven by private interest and appetite is layered with countless incentives and disincentives that go beyond eating. In any case, material relationship underscores the preeminence of the economic moment. Cultural power implies the capacity to influence or shape the minds of others. This includes the development of self-interpretation and attitude towards others. Here, deeply grounded norms and values, i.e., cosmology, that anchor the institutions of a society or give meaning to even more fleeting reflexes such as taste and tolerable idiosyncracies come together to make what Antonio Gramsci calls “common sense” — the ideological construct. In both symbolic and persuasive types, cultural power is highly significant in the determination of who gets what, how, and who gets left out. To be sure, these three forms of power and their correlate mechanisms of enforcement are not totally sealed from each other. Rather, if not interdigitated, they affect each other in intimate and decisive ways.

If unequal power, and therefore justice, is a key factor in the fate of women, pluralistic feminism seems a most pivotal observation point on the domestic milieu, global institutions, and processes of change. Such a project, bent on the promotion of women's combined human rights and capabilities, is likely to both pour light into the dark and treacherous alleys of globalization as well as offer strategies to transform social existence. The result could only serve all of us better.

## II. The Roundtable

The 2000 Macalester International Roundtable brought to campus an interdisciplinary artist and four scholars to offer their thinking on the condition of women. With spatial location, class consciousness, racial belonging, intellectual and artistic orientation, and broad cultural, if not civilizational, belonging inherent in such a commanding theme, the College community was afforded diverse explorations and instructive insights.

We start with Coco Fusco and the keynote presentation. In a play composed to remember a group of working women across the border in Mexico, Fusco offers, in a dramatized and compelling fashion, a sense of the porousness of borders, cultural encounters, and, above all, forms of gendered labor—all emerging from the concreteness of a contemporary stream of life. The power and unfiltered sensibilities of the artistic imagination are on display here.

The first panel is organized around Ifi Amadiume's essay. She captures the contours of maldevelopment in Africa, confirming the fact that the bulk of the cost falls on women. She asserts that African women are active, resisting "discrimination and injustice." Deploying a variety of sources, including the thoughts of Cabral and Fanon, hers is a counterthrust against "postcolonialist" postmodernism and hybridity. Katie Nelson is in broad sympathy with the basic argument but is concerned about the damage of a series of "dualisms" inherent in the essay. Moreover, she challenges Amadiume's conception of African women in the continent's precolonial past, as well as reminds us of the negative effect of postcolonial state policies on women. Ruthann Godollei affirms the retreat from "basic" livelihood questions. Drawing on local American experiences, particularly in the evolving idea of the artist, she speaks on the commodification of culture and female identity in the West.

Sheila Rowbotham's presentation is the center block of the next conversation. She offers a historical reflection at the intersection of self-determination and "claims of livelihood." These insights are related to contemporary thinking on feminism—particularly in Britain. Alireza Javaheri identifies a number of commendable points of the essay but reminds us of the effects of race, class, and sexuality in the attempt to forge a transnationalist feminism. Teresita Martinez Vergne appreciates the connection between concepts and lived time. However, she

points to an implicit privileging of class—the working class—in the valorization of women's struggles.

The third discussion is inspired by Asma Barlas's provocative ideas. She points to the variety of Islamic communities and cultures. Acknowledging the daunting difficulties inherent in such a task, she focuses on the relationship between the Quran—Islam's most sacred text—and issues of sexual inequality and oppression. Her thesis is that the Quran, gross misunderstanding notwithstanding, is a liberationist text that "undermines the fundamental claims of patriarchies." Laura Luitje underscores three points: (1) Barlas's arguments are counterfactual which belie the easy dismissal of Muslim feminism as an oxymoron; (2) a continuation of the struggle over the interpretation of Islam through the ages; and (3) the variability of the role of women in Islamic societies. In the end, she poses a number of original questions that compel Barlas to respond in writing. Linda Schulte-Sasse draws on recent American experience to comment on morality, interpretation, and self-monitoring. Two points define her engagement: the difficulty of distinguishing between the ostensible purity of the message and the fallibility of the medium; and, secondly, problematic stances that assume synonymy of anti-female oppression and anti-patriarchy.

We conclude with Vera Kutzinski's essay. Hers is an alert to both the narrowness of postcolonial feminism and the potential value in an encounter between such thinking and queer theory. Furthermore, Kutzinski stresses what she sees as the hostility of Caribbean feminist scholarship to "poststructuralist and postmodernist theories." Anne Gomez Huff joins the dialogue by focusing on the interface of place and what she calls "counter-discursive disciplines." She reminds us of the potential of feminist acts on these locations. Michelle Wright's intervention underlines the negative consequences of the dominance of heteronormativity—including the disfigurement of citizen and nation. She concludes by suggesting an interesting meaning of the concept of return—a "moment of realization."

The 2001 Macalester International Roundtable will meditate on international health.

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## Notes

1. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 1.
2. Kate Zahnike, "The Reluctant Feminist," *Educational Life* (8 April 2001): 35.
3. The World Bank, *Can Africa Claim the 21st Century?* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2000), p. 24.
4. Valentine M. Moghadam, ed., *Patriarchy and Development: Women's Positions at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); I. Tinker, ed., *Persistent Inequalities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); G. Standing, "Global Feminisation through Flexible Labor," *World Development* 17, no. 7 (1989); M. Yajori, *Voices from the Japanese Women's Movement* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1996); T.D. Truong, *Sex, Money and Morality* (London: Zed Press, 1990); A. Chhachhi and R. Pittin, eds., *Confronting State, Capital and Patriarchy: Women Organizing in the Process of Industrialization* (London: Macmillan Press, 1995); and S. Jokes, *Women and the World Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).