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The Global Household: Toward a Feminist Postcapitalist International Political Economy

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Maliha Safri  
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## The Global Household: Toward a Feminist Postcapitalist International Political Economy

**O**ver the past twenty years, a burgeoning literature on transnationalism has brought into view international “migrant circuits” involving multi-directional flows of people, goods, and resources (Rouse 1991, 14); the constitution and maintenance of “transnational families” (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002); and the state-migrant intersection in countries of origin and destination (Glick Schiller 2005).<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, attention is directed not only to migrants who become incorporated into one nation-state while maintaining social relations that embed them in others but also to non-migrants left behind in countries of origin. Recent studies, for example, have focused on the affective and material conditions of children unable to move with migrant parents, revealing a range of outcomes for these families (Erel 2002; Yeoh, Huang, and Lam 2005). In complement to microlevel ethnographies of transnational families, researchers have begun to consider how transnational networks that link dispersed households and actors alter the larger social field. With 9 million Filipino children—approximately 27 percent of the youth population—growing up physically separated from at least one parent, it is clear that the entire Philippine social space is affected by the actions of a relatively small migrant stream (Parreñas 2005).<sup>2</sup>

This article takes on a related but underexplored aspect of trans-

I would like to dedicate this article to the memory of my brilliant coauthor, Julie Graham, who passed away before the article could be published. She was a truly organic intellectual and an insightful collaborator—Maliha Safri.

<sup>1</sup> Additional work includes the exploration of trans(national) gender and sexuality (Le Espiritu 2001) and hybrid subjectivities (Lowe 1996). Indeed, the study of a fraction of the globe’s population living with a proverbial foot in two places has helped to spawn theories of the liminal and hybrid, destabilizing acknowledged framings of subjectivity, epistemology, and politics (Bhabha 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Some recent research on this topic appears in two issues of *Global Networks* (vol. 4, no. 3 [2004] and vol. 5, no. 4 [2005]) devoted exclusively to the transnational family.

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nationalism: the political economy of the global household, particularly in its role as an aggregate or macroactor in the global economy. The global household is defined as an institution formed by family networks dispersed across national boundaries. These networks are composed of nuclear and extended families and friends.

In the aggregate, the global household produces and distributes a large quantum of social wealth in the form of unpaid household labor, household-based business income, monetary and in-kind remittances, and gifts. It thus participates in international production, finance, and trade in addition to the coordination of international migration. Yet despite its potential to shape and alter economic indicators and processes such as gross domestic product (GDP), the balance of payments, the relative valuation of currencies, economic development, and the gender and social division of labor, the global household is seldom viewed as an economic actor. This is not only because those who recognize its existence generally see it as acted upon by other economic and governmental institutions; more fundamentally, it reflects the fact that the operations of the global household in the global economy are seldom accorded theoretical standing or empirical attention.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, then, we are not only correcting an oversight but attempting to constitute an object of inquiry, policy, and politics where none formerly existed. We begin by locating the global household as a cognate of two recognizable and relatively respectable theoretical objects—the household and the transnational family. We then attempt to build its credentials as a macroeconomic category by estimating its (considerable) size and representing its consequential role in international finance and production. In the latter part of the article, we explore some potential effects of activating the global household as a political economic concept, looking particularly at three areas of inquiry and activism: globalization, development, and economic transformation. Specifically, we argue that a prioritizing focus on the global household strengthens the vision of globalization from below; alters the participants, practices, and potentials of economic development; and reconfigures the imaginary of economic transformation. We conclude with an invitation to explore the unknown territory of the future armed with new concepts and a refusal to accept standard notions of economic power and global unfolding. Our hope is to contribute to the emergence of a feminist, postcapitalist inter-

<sup>3</sup> See Smith and Wallerstein (1992) for papers that view the household from a global (world-systems) perspective but do not focus on the global household per se.

national political economy that could inform a globally transformative economic politics.

### **Situating the global household in theory**

In putting forward a discursive entity called the global household, we find ourselves standing squarely on the shoulders of theoretical giants—feminists, both academic and nonacademic, as well as economic anthropologists and sociologists who have constituted the household as a theoretical object and focus of inquiry and activism.<sup>4</sup> These theoretical and activist pioneers have undermined naturalistic assumptions about what constitutes a household (Harris 1981), pushing us to recognize that this concept, like “woman,” is an empty universal carrying no essential commonalities; we must seek out household functions in each social location (Yanagisako 1979). Our predecessors have also attempted to conceptualize the production and distribution of wealth in households in contrast to the familiar depiction of the household as exclusively the site of consumption. In this way their work has contributed to the broader project of theorizing non-capitalist economic spaces and practices that are organized by logics other than profit maximization and expansion or growth.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps most importantly, through representing households as historically specific and culturally variable, they have enlarged the possibility of a household-based politics of economic transformation (Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff 1994; Gibson-Graham, Resnick, and Wolff 2000; Gibson-Graham 2006a).

One of the major challenges confronting feminists has been the relative invisibility of women’s unpaid labor as an economic contribution, particularly in wealthier nations where capitalism and markets are presumed to flourish unrivaled. It is not surprising, then, that second-wave feminism saw the emergence of an entire subfield of political economy concerned with accounting for the magnitude of unpaid labor and nonmarket value produced in households (see, e.g., Waring 1988; Folbre 1995; Ironmonger 1996). Empirical investigations confirmed what theorists and activists had long suspected: that the household was as important (at least in magnitude) as the firm in terms of economic activity worldwide. Faye

<sup>4</sup> A clear distinction must be drawn between household, usually defined in terms of coresidence, and family, usually defined in terms of kinship. Many writers have pointed out the problems of treating family and household as synonyms and argued for their rigorous separation (e.g., Goody 1972).

<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that household members do not engage in capitalist and other market-oriented activities on site or off site.

Soupourmas and Duncan Ironmonger (2002) estimate, for example, that value equivalent to 80 percent of Australia's GDP was produced in that country's households in 2000. Armed with such substantive estimates, feminist economists have sought to establish a macroeconomic theory and practice of accounting for unpaid labor that is particularly attentive to the effects of economic institutions and policies upon households (Cloud and Garrett 1996). One practical proposal involves modifying the UN system of national accounts to include gross household product as a complement to gross market product, each treated as a contribution to gross economic product (Ironmonger 1996). The unfolding of the neoliberal economic order has given this sort of project considerable urgency because reductions in state welfare provisions necessitate dramatic increases in unpaid household labor (Benería and Feldman 1992) and because women's increased labor force participation simultaneously reduces the availability of that labor (Hoskyns and Rai 2007).

In addition to carrying out projects of visibility and accounting, scholars of the household have produced both theoretical and empirical analyses of household social and production relations. Much of the interest and innovation in this area can be connected to Marxian studies of peasant or agrarian households. In two seminal works published in 1924 and 1925, "On the Theory of Non-capitalist Economic Systems" and "Peasant Farm Organization," respectively, Aleksandr Chayanov theorized the mode of production in Soviet peasant households as distinct from capitalism, communism, slavery, and feudalism (Harris 1981; Fabietti 1990). Importantly, the family mode of production was not simply a capitalist precursor but a form of economic organization that was actually more efficient than large-scale capitalist farms despite its lack of interest in maximizing surplus or profit (Shanin 1986).

Chayanov challenged the notion that economic space was homogeneous and optimally organized under an exploitative capitalism or Stalinist socialism: "We have no doubt that the future of economic theory lies not in constructing a single universal theory of economic life but in conceiving a number of theoretical systems that would be adequate to the range of present or past economic orders and would disclose the forms of their coexistence and evolution" (Chayanov 1986, 28). Among the Western anthropologists influenced by Chayanov was Marshall Sahlins (1972), who posited the domestic mode of production as a theoretical construct through which to view the household's economic motivations and pur-

suits.<sup>6</sup> Sahlins characterized capitalism as subject to a limitless logic of accumulation, while the domestic mode of production is characterized by production for use. More recent work by feminists on a “patriarchal mode of production” has continued to foreground production within the household as a distinctive economic process organized very differently from production in other sites such as the capitalist firm (Folbre 1987; see also Delphy and Leonard 1992).

The work of Chayanov, Sahlins, Nancy Folbre, and others elevates the household economy to a level of analysis usually reserved for major modes of production. It brings to the fore marginalized economic processes, constitutes a novel object of inquiry, and lays the theoretical groundwork for the feminist accounting of household labor and production discussed above. Most importantly for us, it prefigures and participates in a larger feminist project of decentering political economic theory from capitalism, producing a discourse of economic difference in which the heterogeneity of economic activity is foregrounded rather than obscured (see Gibson-Graham 2006a, 2006b).

Drawing on economic anthropology and sociology along with queer theory and poststructuralist feminism, J. K. Gibson-Graham theorizes a diverse postcapitalist economic landscape characterized by market, alternative market, and nonmarket transactions; waged, alternatively compensated, and unpaid labor; and capitalist, alternative capitalist, and noncapitalist firms and organizations (2006b, 71). Each of these categories is open-ended and internally differentiated; thus, for example, the category noncapitalist firms includes both exploitative slave-based and feudal enterprises as well as nonexploitative independent (self-employed) producers and worker-owned cooperatives that appropriate and distribute the surplus they produce. Heterogeneous noncapitalist economic activities coexist with capitalist ones in a diverse economic landscape, interacting in ways that must be investigated rather than presumed. Starting with this differentiated and proliferative economic ontology, we can begin to see and analyze the diversity, complexity, and interdependence of capitalist and noncapitalist economic activity. Rather than simply endowing capitalism with natural hegemony, we can call into question the presumptive subordination or inferiority of other economic forms. As we explore their resiliency and potential for growth and learn from their failures and deficiencies, we can create an economic knowledge that serves positive pro-

<sup>6</sup> See also the work of Stephen Gudeman (e.g., 2001) on the domestic or household economy.

jects of economic construction. Ultimately, we can engage in a postcapitalist economic politics both within and outside the academy without falling into utopianism or despair.

The project of generating a discourse of economic difference is one ingredient in that postcapitalist politics. Its goal is to render visible and credible the huge array of hidden and alternative economic activities that currently exist, some of which can be enrolled and built upon in transformative economic projects—for example, the solidarity economy movement that is emerging worldwide (Miller 2006). In this article, we embark upon the related theoretical project of rendering the global household visible and credible as an object of inquiry, policy, and politics. As with every other site in the diverse economy, there is no one set of economic activities and relations that can be universally assigned to households. While we follow feminist accounting practice in defining household production as non-market-oriented production performed by unpaid household members, we recognize that it is fully possible for household labor to be performed by paid domestic workers (and counted in GDP). Moreover, the presence of noncapitalist, nonmarket activity in the household does not presume that such activity is nonexploitative—indeed, it has been observed that exploitative slave and feudal relations often obtain among household members (Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff 1994). Nor does it preclude the coexistence in the same site and among the same people of market transactions and market-oriented production, which may be performed under exploitative capitalist, slave, or feudal relations, or nonexploitative communal (collectively governed) or independent (self-governed) relations. In what follows, however, when we refer to the household as a site of noncapitalist production we are referring only to the production of domestic and caring services by household members. Those services, it should be remembered, account for as much as half of world economic activity (depending on the accounting system being employed).

### **Global households, transnational families, and economic transformation**

Our intervention relies not only on existing theories of the household but also on related studies of transnational family networks connecting migrants and people in the country (or countries in some diasporically dispersed cases) of origin. This literature furnishes examples of transformations in production relations within transnational families, which we draw upon as evidence of the potential for economic transformation in global households.

Within the larger field of transnationalism, the formation of transnational families has been the focus of a number of ethnographic and country-specific studies, many of which relate in part to the household economy and its maintenance. A historical study by Deborah Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela (2002) traces forms of the transnational family in Europe, briefly examining intermarriage across national boundaries in Europe's royal families as well as the sorts of transnational families that emerged with European colonialism (in which families maintained connections with their home countries) and with the mass movement of Europeans to the Americas between 1840 and 1910. Ethnographies by Ellen Oxfeld (1993) and Aihwa Ong (1999) explore some of the complex ways in which transnational families have pursued family-based strategies to engage in capitalist economic activity. Of particular interest to us are contemporary ethnographic analyses exploring the transformations of household production relations associated with labor migration, including shifts in what might be called class relations of exploitation involving domestic and caring labor (Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff 1994). These ethnographic works suggest the transformative possibilities that a domestic politics of the global household might engender.

Focusing on female-led migration involving migrant women who leave children behind, a number of scholars look at the ways "transnational motherhood" (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997) is performed through spatial and temporal separations. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila (1997) interview Latina immigrant women who work as nannies or housekeepers in Los Angeles and who resignify motherhood in the process; in their interviews, the women claim that separation in no way implies abandonment of children but allows them to become better mothers precisely through migration. Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2005) addresses the maintenance of intimacy between Filipina migrant mothers and their distant children. Through telephone calls, letters, text messages, e-mails, and, as stressed by Parreñas, remittances, migrant mothers manage to maintain family connections. In Parreñas's ethnographic study, Filipina mothers comanage bank accounts with daughters more often than with spouses and almost never with sons, revealing the evolution of increased female power, obligation, and responsibility. Parreñas cautions, however, that despite the possibility for gender resubjectivation inherent in becoming the breadwinner, women continue to supply long-distance affective labor that men fail to provide.

Readers may surmise from the title of Parreñas's book *Servants of Globalization* (2001) that she adopts the victims-of-globalization perspective described by Katherine Gibson, Lisa Law, and Deirdre McKay (2001). In most leftist analyses Filipina contract migrants are represented as victim-



ized by a global labor market, with their liberation implicitly tethered to the unlikely project of eliminating capitalism. Multiply-disadvantaged as third-world women of color, they, along with their male counterparts, form part of a superexploited “new international proletariat, . . . the globalized workforce of the world capitalist economy” (Gibson, Law, and McKay 2001, 370). Coexisting with this victim portrayal is a national hero identity invoked by the Philippine state to inspire migrant workers to remit foreign currency. However, Gibson, Law, and McKay argue that the imposition of victim and national hero identities forecloses a discussion of multiple migrant identities and experiences. They demonstrate, for example, that returning migrants may become involved in many different class relations: independent production and self-appropriation among returnees who operate sole proprietorships, capitalist surplus appropriation from employees in their small businesses, and land ownership and extraction of feudal rents, as well as a range of cooperative or communal class relations in community enterprises or in their households.

Examining household relations of domestic production in particular, McKay (2004) identifies changes underway in Filipino transnational families. On the basis of ethnographic material from Al-Alinao Norte, a rural Philippine village in which 85 percent of households have at least one (in most cases, female) member abroad, she reveals that men have taken up traditionally female tasks such as child care and laundry, “while returned migrant women are running for traditionally male positions in government” (McKay 2004, 5). Through migration, both migrant women and the men who never left have undergone a resubjectivation process. Men have begun to “share the parenting of children with a long-distance partner/breadwinner, rather than a ‘traditional wife’” (7). One can discern the contours of a shift in household production away from a gender division of labor that may have been organized under a patriarchal mode of production and perhaps even toward a collective or communal mode of production in which men and women share decision making and production responsibilities. In McKay’s work, we see an analysis of noncapitalist class relations in global households (see Gibson-Graham, Resnick, and Wolff 2000) and encounter the possibility that migration may contribute to the emergence of new economic forms and subjects in the household site.

### **Instituting an institution: The global household as an economic category**

In large part due to feminist scholarly efforts, both the household and the transnational family have been acknowledged and theorized as eco-

conomic institutions, with the former accounted through a plethora of national-level or macroeconomic studies and the latter investigated primarily through microlevel ethnographic research. Contemporary assessments of the magnitude of household production in developed and developing countries alike support the idea that the household economy is quantitatively significant at the national level (see, e.g., Ironmonger 1993, 1996; Soupourmas and Ironmonger 2002). We would like to make a similar case for the global household in the realm of the global political economy, emphasizing its aggregate size and its role in international finance and production. Quantitative estimates of its population and the magnitude of its financial transactions and output, however rough, will help to buttress our theoretical point—that the global household should be treated as a significant institution and consequential force on the international scene, on a par with multinational corporations (MNCs) and with national and international institutions of government.

#### ***Populating the global household***

A global household is defined as comprising the people who migrate, plus the people who are born into or otherwise incorporated into the immigrant household (e.g., through marriage or cohabitation), plus the people left behind, including new entrants to the home-country household.<sup>7</sup> Each global household, then, may comprise multiple dwelling units in both host and home countries. What links these households and makes them describable as a single entity despite their geographical dispersion are ties of economic and emotional interdependence and structures of decision making or governance.

In 2005, approximately 191 million people lived outside the countries in which they were born (United Nations 2006). These migrants represented 3 percent of the world's population in 2005 and were concentrated in a small number of countries (63 percent of migrants live in so-called developed countries). And this is where the data leaves us.

The population of the global household would ideally be captured by two types of information that no national or international agency currently gathers: first, the total population of households formed by migrants in destination countries (including nonmigrant spouses, children, extended family members, cohabitators, etc.) as well as, second, the total population of households affectively or materially connected to a migrant in the countries of origin (left-behind spouses, children, in-laws, parents and grand-

<sup>7</sup> This includes native-born children who leave their birth households but maintain extended family ties.

parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, coresident friends, etc.). Without these ideal statistics, we are forced to address the problem of estimation indirectly.

Starting with destination countries, we can derive an estimate of global household population from data gathered for the United States on foreign-stock households, which are households containing at least one foreign-born person or one person whose parent was foreign born. Using U.S. census data from 1997 to 2001, Mark Ellis and Richard Wright (2005) estimate that in the United States 76.5 million people, or 28 percent of the population, live in foreign-stock households, while 10.4 percent are immigrants. Boldly extrapolating from their findings, we can calculate the world foreign-stock population for 2005 as a 2.8 multiple of immigrants, or 535 million people. But we are still at some distance from a global household population estimate for destination countries. Given the difference between the foreign-stock household and the global household as we have defined it and given the likelihood that foreign-stock household size varies among destination countries, we conservatively estimate global household population in immigrant-receiving countries at 400 million (approximately 6 percent of global population). This would mean slightly more than one non-foreign-born person for every foreign-born person in these households.

Estimating global household population in countries of origin cannot rely, however shakily, on large quantitative studies. Instead we must resort to smaller studies, qualitative research, and the educated guess, perhaps in the end more accurate bases for estimation. There is a reasonable likelihood, for example, that the number of global household members in sending countries is greater than that in receiving countries. Many migrants leave their children with grandmothers or other female kin who are likely to have families of their own. Parreñas (2005) observes this child care arrangement in the Philippines, while Umut Erel (2002) and Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997) observe similar arrangements in Turkey and Latin America, respectively. Moreover, remittances are sent primarily to kin to educate siblings and to improve standards of living through housing construction and the purchase of durable goods. It is likely that the households receiving these benefits comprise at least two people and probably more. Thus, we feel comfortable replicating our estimated number of global household members for destination countries, yielding an estimate of 400 million people in countries of origin. Combining our two estimates to yield 800 million, we simultaneously boldly and conservatively suggest that at least 12 percent of the world's population (approximately

6.5 billion people in 2005) can be identified as living in a global household as we have defined it.

***The global household as an international financial institution***

Estimates of official remittance flows show that they have increased steadily since information on remittances first started to be recorded, from \$43.3 billion in 1980 to \$70 billion in 1995 to \$297 billion in 2005 (World Bank 2005).<sup>8</sup> Most remittance researchers, however, claim that official remittances represent the tip of the iceberg. Estimates of unrecorded flows as a percentage of recorded flows vary greatly by country, given different prevalence rates of unrecorded remittances. The World Bank (2005) estimates the size of total unrecorded remittances to have been 50 percent or more of recorded remittances in 2005, with regional variation in areas such as sub-Saharan Africa, where the ratio is substantially higher at 122 percent.

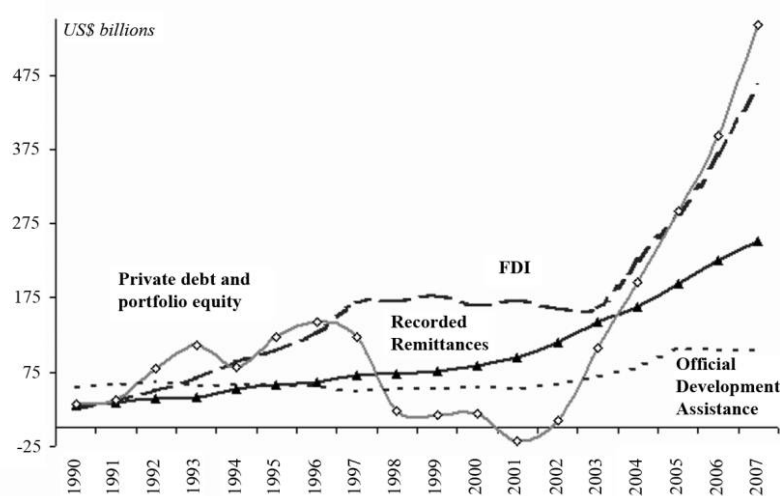
For both sending and receiving countries the importance of remittances is suggested by comparison to other financial flows and activities (see fig. 1).<sup>9</sup> In 2005 the top nineteen recipient countries accepted remittances equal to 10 percent or more of their GDP. For developing countries, remittances constitute a major and consistent capital flow (Harrison 2003) comparable to foreign direct investment (FDI) by MNCs. Mexico, second only to India among the world's top recipients, received remittances greater than its FDI in 2004 (World Bank 2005). The ratio of remittances to FDI is higher for developing countries that are not among the top receivers. For instance, in Kenya in 2004 remittances were about nine times the size of FDI and twice the size of official development assistance (Ngunjiri 2006).

In figure 1 recorded remittances appear as the most stable capital flow to developing countries.<sup>10</sup> The consistent growth of remittances is remark-

<sup>8</sup> We use U.S. dollars throughout as the base currency when referring to monetary amounts.

<sup>9</sup> For a review and assessment of the substantial literature on remittances from a political economy perspective, see Grabel (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Growth of remittances slowed in 2008, but it remained positive. Estimates in November of 2009 revealed a decline in remittances of approximately 6.1 percent from the previous year, largely due to the global economic crisis; the decline is small, however, relative to the projected fall in private capital flows and official aid to developing countries (Ratha and Mohapatra 2009). While higher unemployment in migrant-intensive sectors such as construction is translating to lower average migrant incomes (Kochhar 2008), this does not change the fact that remittances are more stable than other major capital flows. In addition, remittances tend to follow a countercyclical path. As income gaps between remitters and receivers increase, remittances become more likely. Given this tendency, we



**Figure 1** Remittances and capital flows to developing countries. Source: World Bank, Migration and Remittances Data, Excel chart downloaded from <http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTDECPROSPECTS/0,,contentMDK:21122856~pagePK:64165401~piPK:64165026~theSitePK:476883,00.html>. © 2007 World Bank. Reprinted with permission.

able, not dropping off even during the East Asian financial crisis. The bulk of remittances flow from north to south: in 2005, for example, 72 percent of remittances flowed from developed countries to developing countries (World Bank 2005). On average, remittances from households in sending countries are very small: the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development estimated average remittances using 2000 data from the International Monetary Fund's (IMF's) balance-of-payments yearbook for Asian migrants (excluding South Asians) to be \$957 per year, for the Asian subcontinent \$100 per year, and for migrants within North America \$735 per year (Harrison 2003). Because of both the composition and directional flow of remittances, they have been identified by some as a democratic capital flow.

The volume of remittance flows hints at the power of the global household to generate and distribute significant monetized value. But the story of remittances does not end with the quantum of value remitted; it must also include what happens through the economy's multiplier effect, defined as the increased spending, employment, and production in a region due to an initial injection of money. People who receive remittances buy

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cannot assume that remittances will decline if the global crisis worsens and family members in countries of origin face further reductions in their standards of living.

food and build houses, and each economic action triggers someone else's receipt of income. Using data from 1980 to 1986, Irma Adelman and J. Edward Taylor (1990) estimate that every dollar remitted to Mexico generated an increase of between \$2.69 and \$3.18 in that country's GDP. They also find that remittances sent to rural communities result in a greater multiplier effect because rural households tend to purchase locally produced commodities rather than imports. Their findings indicate that most of the benefits of remittances accrue to people other than the direct recipients of the money.<sup>11</sup> In 1996 "migradollars" (Durand, Parrado, and Massey 1996) sent home by Mexicans in the United States generated approximately \$9.3 billion in additional income.<sup>12</sup>

### ***The global household and international production***

In addition to coordinating international migration and the distribution of remittances, the global household is an everyday site of production. Market-oriented production by household- and family-based businesses aside, each global household undertakes some or all of the following tasks: child care, health care, elder care, affective labor, education, cooking, cleaning, shopping, laundry, sewing and mending clothes, gardening and food production, household maintenance and repair, and so on.<sup>13</sup> Using estimates provided by feminist economists (e.g., Ironmonger 1996), we conservatively assume that value equivalent to 80 percent of GDP is produced through household nonmarket activity in rich and poor countries alike. This means that, with world GDP at approximately \$50 trillion in 2006, world gross household product had an estimated value of \$40 trillion in the same year.<sup>14</sup> If, as we have suggested above, global household population constitutes 12 percent of world population, we can estimate the value of gross global household product in 2006 at \$4.8 trillion, a significant quantum of social wealth.

Given the spatial dispersion of the global household, a certain amount of household production takes place at the international scale. This marks

<sup>11</sup> This finding is particularly important since remittances are sometimes dismissed as having isolated effects on the senders and receivers.

<sup>12</sup> The base year used was 1989.

<sup>13</sup> These activities are frequently identified as social reproduction (Hoskyns and Rai 2007). We follow Karl Marx in recognizing all economic activities (and, indeed, all activities) as involved in the overall cycle of social and material reproduction. In this article and elsewhere, we focus on the moment of production within the cycle of reproduction. That moment occurs in households, firms, government institutions, and other sites.

<sup>14</sup> World gross domestic product refers to the total value of goods and services bought and sold globally.

the global household as an international economic institution, while presenting both difficulties and opportunities for global household workers. A degree of flexibility is afforded, for example, when child rearing is conducted through an international division of labor. Parents may send older children back to the home country, sometimes for years, when a newborn arrives. If teenagers become truant or if fears arise about drugs, gangs, or sexual activity, they may be sent home to relatives in places that present fewer opportunities for unruly behavior. Arlie Hochschild (2000) calls attention to the parallels between international production in firms and that taking place in households when she refers to a “global care chain” typically involving “an older daughter from a poor family who cares for her siblings while her mother works as a nanny caring for the children of a migrating nanny who, in turn, cares for the child of a family in a rich country” (131).

Another major form of international production entails coordinating health care and elder care between global household members. This may involve obtaining copies of medical records for a distant relative, taking these records for a second opinion to doctors in the host country, pursuing appointments with specialists in both countries, adjudicating between conflicting recommendations for care, communicating complex medical information, arranging for surgical procedures, and coordinating follow-up in two locations. In the case of a complicated or extended illness, care of a distant household member may require in-person visits (Safri 2006).

An often time-consuming form of international production (which overlaps with the caring labor we have already discussed) involves what has been called emotional or affective labor (Fraad 2000). Global household members who have left others at home must engage in relationship maintenance (keeping a long-distance marriage or parental, sibling, or friend relationship alive) and manage disputes over money, child rearing, infidelity, and other intrahousehold tensions. Cheap telephone rates and free online communication mean that dispersed household members can spend as much as five to ten hours per week engaged in emotional labor (Parreñas 2005).

**The global household as an international economic institution:  
Globalization, development, and economic transformation**

As we have documented above, the global household is a demographically significant, financially consequential, geographically dispersed institution engaged in international production. It coordinates and participates in international migration and contributes the most stable capital flow to

developing countries in the form of intrahousehold remittances (see fig. 1). In addition, it orchestrates and carries out international production of child care, health care, elder care, and affective labor. Acknowledging and foregrounding these activities of the global household changes the topography of globalization and shifts the focus of international political economy to include noncapitalist development, grassroots finance, and domestic labor and transactions. In what follows, we briefly discuss the implications of the global household for understanding globalization and offer a more extended discussion of its actual and potential roles in development and economic transformation.

Recognizing households as global players alongside multinational firms, nation-states, and international institutions also changes how we understand the unfolding of globalization. Grassroots global organizations and global/local spatialities are not aspects of a futuristic dream but existing formations that are actively transforming economic landscapes. With migrant remittances exceeding official development assistance by a substantial margin, it is now well recognized that possibilities for economic development are increasingly dependent on global household contributions. Not only are we seeing globalization from below, but we are seeing development from below as well.

The potential effect of this reassignment of responsibility for development funding is a major change in the theory and practice of development. Historically, the goal of development has been the instigation and expansion of capitalist industrialization, often starting with industrial agriculture, intended to produce a generalized increase in social well-being. Foreign direct investment by international corporations is the engine of development preferred by multilateral organizations, such as the IMF and World Bank, and by the international development agencies of wealthy countries, which work to foster FDI through programmatic and financial assistance. But with remittances exceeding foreign aid as a potential source of funding, we are encountering new development financiers and practitioners (rural and urban households) and novel development practices, including the cultivation of noncapitalist economic forms both within and outside the household. This is not to say that remittances are not being used to finance capitalist enterprise—the government of India, for example, encourages nonresident Indians to invest in capitalist firms—but rather that noncapitalist activity has more access to finance than it previously had.

A Mexican example of a noncapitalist enterprise appeared on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* in a series on remittances in April 2006. The article tracked the formation of a women's worker cooperative in Ayo-



quezco, Oaxaca, that was supported by migrant remittances. Female relatives of migrant workers pooled their remittances in a cooperative food business, *Mujeres Embasadoras de Nopales de Ayoquezco* (MENA; Women nopal processors of Ayoquezco), that grows, processes, packages, and markets a native cactus (nopal), among other foods. In 2007 MENA opened a processing plant to expand production of organic pickled cactus leaves for export (Sanchez and Enriquez 2007), using capital obtained from a migrant organization in California. The women were hopeful that, with the new plant in operation, their migrant husbands and children could return home to take up positions in the growing cooperative.<sup>15</sup>

A worker cooperative is a noncapitalist enterprise in which workers appropriate and distribute the surplus (often narrowly construed as profit) that they jointly produce. It is thus a democratic and nonexploitative type of enterprise, unlike a capitalist firm in which the surplus is appropriated and distributed by an individual capitalist or board of directors (Resnick and Wolff 1987).<sup>16</sup> A more common type of noncapitalist (and nonexploitative) enterprise funded by migrant investment is the sole proprietorship, in which the self-employed worker-owner appropriates and distributes the surplus that she herself produces. Many returning migrants establish small businesses that allow them to become self-appropriating, and others, remaining in host countries, send remittances to household members to do the same.

But the noncapitalist development fostered by the global household is not limited to enterprise or the market sector. The household itself can be seen as a locus of noncapitalist development once it is acknowledged as a site of production as well as consumption. Most remittance-use studies show that remittances are spent to acquire land and finance home con-

<sup>15</sup> The Fundación para la Productividad en el Campo (FPPC; Foundation for rural productivity) helped MENA develop pest-resistant nopal, gain organic certification, and conduct feasibility studies on market expansion. In coordination with the FPPC, the North American Integration and Development Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, assisted in the development of an Ayoquezco immigrant-owned marketing and distribution business (Chapulín LLC) to support MENA products in the United States. The center also generated a series of geographic information systems maps of Oaxacan immigrant communities in California to help identify where Chapulín LLC should focus its activities (Takash, Hinojosa-Ojeda, and Runsten 2005).

<sup>16</sup> While the example of MENA might seem an isolated case, it should be noted that the international worker cooperative movement is vibrant and growing, with existing complexes of cooperatives employing hundreds of thousands of workers in Italy and the Basque region of Spain. Recently, the very successful Mondragón Cooperative Corporation in Spain embarked upon a collaboration with the United Steelworkers to establish worker cooperatives in the United States and Canada ([http://assets.usw.org/Releases/agree\\_usw\\_mondragon.pdf](http://assets.usw.org/Releases/agree_usw_mondragon.pdf)).

struction, as well as to purchase education for children, consumer non-durable goods such as clothing and medicine, and durable goods like washing machines. Economists are especially guilty of dismissing remittances as financing consumption rather than recognizing them as productive investment (for valuable reviews, see Durand, Parrado, and Massey [1996] and Taylor et al. [1996]). From their perspective, expenditures on housing or washing machines are dead investments, meaning they do not lead to further economic activity (despite the fact that each could be seen to generate a multiplier effect in local or national industries). From a feminist economic perspective, however, these expenditures are investments in noncapitalist, non-market-oriented production that goes on in the household economy. Buying a washing machine dramatically improves labor productivity, and purchasing or upgrading a home can be an important precondition for the performance of activities such as child care, elder care, health care, cooking, and so on. Remittances to a region with a large number of global households thus offer great potential for creating a generalized increase in social well-being, the putative goal of economic development.

The global household, in addition to being recognizable as an aggregate or composite actor, is increasingly revealed as a collective actor in the process of development. Consider the unique forms of economic development sponsored by Mexican migrant hometown associations, or HTAs, based in Los Angeles, Chicago, and other major U.S. cities (Fox and Bada 2008). Originally formed by groups of Mexican families and friends from the same town or village to facilitate the transfer of remittances, their functions now extend to various forms of community development in Mexico.<sup>17</sup> Hometown associations financially support social welfare and community services, infrastructure development, education, environmental protection, and productivity enhancement, among other benefits (Fox and Bada 2008, 450). Infrastructural improvements include electrification, paving roads, constructing sewage treatment or water filtration plants, park creation, and constructing health care facilities (Orozco and Lapointe 2004). Most HTAs raise and spend about ten thousand dollars a year, reflecting the small scale of household-based remittances. In 2007 HTAs contributed approximately \$22 million to a three-to-one matching-funds program in which HTA remittances are matched by contributions from

<sup>17</sup> The Mexican states of Zacatecas, Jalisco, and Michoacán participate in a tripartite financial agreement with HTAs: for every dollar donated, the federal, state, and municipal governments each contribute an additional dollar (in some locales there is a four-to-one arrangement involving towns or cities; Orozco and Lapointe 2004).

Mexican federal, state, and local governments (Aparicio and Meseguer 2008).

Participating in development through HTAs has changed global households, shaping members into subjects who connect to entire communities and not exclusively their own extended families. Through HTAs, migrant households operate as citizens involved in directing community economic development. In 2005, for example, the HTAs raised more money than could be matched, and projects had to be prioritized (García Zamora 2007). The prioritization process was a first-time occurrence and through public pressure became a process that required the approval of neighborhood committees and municipal and state representatives in Mexico as well as HTAs in the United States.

More directly focused on alternative enterprise development, the Philippines-based nongovernmental organization Unlad Kabayan has established the Migrant Savings for Alternative Investment (MSAI) program, organizing Filipino migrants to pool a share of their earnings as capital for community-oriented businesses at home. The project involves training global household members overseas and in the Philippines to see themselves as collective actors wielding economic power to transform their communities (Community Economies Collective and Gibson 2009). This is a difficult and sometimes divisive task; migrants who set aside a portion of their earnings for collective investment often come into conflict with household members at home who object to alternative uses of household wealth. Unlad Kabayan expends considerable energy training and supporting MSAI participants in their decisions to engage collectively in economic development.

Although the sums they contribute are small, global households are involved in directing the kind of infrastructural, social, and economic development that is historically the province of nations or international organizations. For better and sometimes for worse, nation-states have responded with enthusiasm to this new source of development funding. A number of Latin American countries (including El Salvador, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic) have taken steps to form or have already formed HTAs in the hope of emulating the Mexican migrant development model and changing the face and practice of development (Paul and Gamage 2005).

New forms of development finance, potentially oriented toward non-capitalist development, are but one of the sources of economic transformation traceable to global households. As we have seen, the global household has introduced an international division of labor into the household economy. The tasks of child care, health care, and elder care, as well as the emotional labor of relationship maintenance, are often

performed on an international scale, with household members in different countries participating jointly, at one moment and over time, in these productive activities. Moreover, restructuring of the gender and generational divisions of labor in these households is an ever-present possibility, with reports differing greatly between studies, time periods, and countries of origin and destination.

Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992) offers a sophisticated analysis of household transformations in one Mexican immigrant community in the San Francisco area. Comparing pre-1965 with post-1965 immigrants, she finds that pre-1965 households showed a greater change toward egalitarian practices than their later counterparts. The older generation of men experienced longer average sojourns away from their families that allowed for two effects. Women's authority and self-confidence increased since they had to earn sufficient income (often without any financial help from migrant husbands) and manage the rest of the family by themselves. Men, on the other hand, had to wash, iron, and cook for themselves and, in many cases, they continued these activities after their wives and children joined them in the United States. In the post-1965 group, shorter time periods away from family (because relatives quickly joined one another) often meant that no change occurred in the household division of labor. Hondagneu-Sotelo did find, however, new patterns of financial decision making among the post-1965 group, in which women exerted control over important household expenditures.

As noted above, McKay's (2004) work in a Filipino village hints at the significant reordering of the gender division of labor that may occur in a household after one person migrates. The work of Parreñas (2005), also focused on the Philippines, yields the opposite finding that the migration of mothers does not lead to changes in the gender division of labor; in fact, mothers continue to perform affective labor from a distance while entrusting other daily obligations to women at home. In an interesting study of Bangladeshi immigrant men in England who brought only one of two wives, Sultana Mustafa Khanum (2001) shows that while remittances changed and improved the lives of the wives left in Bangladesh, the workload of immigrant wives increased since less money was available for managing and feeding their households. In class-analytic terms we would say that remittances had the effect of increasing exploitation in the sending country even as they made life in the receiving country easier.

Global households have been the site of major innovations in production relations—with changes in the traditional gender division of labor and increases, decreases, or even elimination of women's exploitation all being recognizable outcomes. What can be said definitively, absent further re-

search, is that a global household constitutes a noncapitalist economic site that has the potential to be nonexploitative (i.e., organized around collective decision making and the communal appropriation and distribution of household surplus). As such, it deserves the attention of those who are interested in the politics of noncapitalist development.

### **Conclusion: What is to be done?**

In this article, we have nominated the global household as a cornerstone institution in a feminist, postcapitalist international political economy. We have taken some initial steps toward constituting this institution as an object of inquiry, policy, and politics: first by estimating its aggregate size, financial impact, and contribution to international production; and second by sketching its current and potential roles in globalization, development, and economic transformation. In this concluding section we hope to suggest the difference such a category could make if it were widely accepted in both popular and academic discourse (as is, e.g., the MNC). What if we were to universally recognize the global household as an international actor on a par with the multinational firm? What kinds of political and policy issues might arise, and how might they be dealt with?

We recognize that speaking of the global household as an international actor (in the singular) threatens to obscure the differences among, and divisions and struggles within, global households. Clearly, the global household does not exist as a unitary actor. Any (compromised) unity that emerges from its present heterogeneous disarray would have to be constructed through negotiation and struggle. Nevertheless, we find the idea of a global household movement or organization compelling, in part because a democratic process of negotiation would mobilize effort around issues of general concern while also providing an airing for the many conflicting positions of global household members.

Imagine that an organization representing global households demanded a seat at various economic tables. One issue that might interest such an organization is monetary policy, which currently tends to focus on securing the health of financial or industrial capital. What if global households demanded a say in the policies that rule foreign currency deposits, withdrawals, and interest rates? A global household advocate might argue, for example, for changing the rules on foreign currency deposits to allow global households the advantages accorded to MNCs, especially since their aggregate economic impact can be greater than that of MNCs. If remitters or recipients were allowed to hold foreign currency deposits, they could conserve re-

mittance value and avoid the high fees charged for currency conversion (Meyers 1998).

At the international level, the UN-based International Labour Organization (ILO) “aims . . . to promote rights at work, encourage decent employment opportunities, enhance social protection and strengthen dialogue in handling work-related issues.”<sup>18</sup> The ILO was designed to represent a global constituency made up of workers, governments, and employers. What if there were a similar organization, the Global Household Organization (GHO), representing its own constituencies and promulgating workplace standards, worker rights, social protections, and so on, for global households worldwide? In the U.S. context, undocumented immigration is a major issue into which a newly constituted GHO might intervene. While this is already an issue in which organizations representing migrant populations are deeply involved, the GHO would add a new dimension to the debate, bringing to the table questions of household formation, maintenance, productivity, health and other care, and so on, that have been hitherto marginalized. We are, for example, used to taking into account the necessity for immigrant (and undocumented) labor in firms, but what about the labor requirements of households?

The issue of undocumented migration has ramifications far beyond individual migrants and their places of work. Consider just a few of the many specific complications arising in a global household where one or more members are undocumented: when an adult cannot travel to attend the funeral and dispose of the affairs of a deceased parent or other relative, when a long-distance marriage is in crisis for lack of face-to-face contact for months or years, when an adolescent child tests the authority of the locally responsible parent by engaging in dangerous or illegal behaviors, and when either the migrating or remaining household members try to manage a physical or psychological illness. The crises that all households face—death, illness, familial discord—are intensified for global households by national boundaries separating household members. For activists pushing for the recognition and legalized incorporation of undocumented workers, our argument adds another leg of support: immigrants experience household crises distinctly and often more acutely as a result of the spatial dispersion of their households, which is one more reason for them to be granted citizenship rights.

Some activist organizations have already begun to take a global household perspective, recognizing that focusing on migrants alone is unlikely

<sup>18</sup> See [http://www.ilo.org/global/About\\_the\\_ILO/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/About_the_ILO/lang-en/index.htm).

to address the problems their members are confronting. The New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA), for example, represents approximately seven thousand workers in New York City, over 90 percent of whom are immigrants (Mathew 2005). An organizer for NYTWA has discovered that many of the problems affecting immigrants as workers have to do with what is happening thousands of miles away. Family crises often distract taxi drivers, preventing them from working or leaving them feeling dislocated and anxious. It has occurred to the organizer that developing counterpart organizations in migrants' countries of origin might be a necessary component of organizing and supporting migrant workers in destination countries.<sup>19</sup> In this example, a migrant organization whose current aim is to support migrant workers in various labor struggles (defending them from police brutality, securing worker rights, trying to gain wage parity with native-born workers) has discovered that what goes on in the global household shapes members' work experiences as much or more than what goes on in the workplace.

Academics and feminists in particular are well positioned to play an important role in bringing the global household into visibility and affording it credibility as an international economic institution. In the process, we may shift the orientation of international political economy, which tends to focus on large actors and capitalist dynamics, by documenting the ways that small but numerous noncapitalist economic organizations operate at the international level and generate aggregate economic effects (a globalized economy, grassroots-led development, growth of noncapitalist or alternative capitalist firms, and other outcomes yet to be investigated). Topics that might be fruitfully pursued include the effect of remittances on noncapitalist development; gendered, cultural, and intra-household factors that shape the ways remittances are spent; and global household interactions with other global actors, including nation-states, international financial institutions, international capitalist and noncapitalist firms, and international social movements. Many other questions are wide open for research: How do members of global households coordinate production of household wealth across vast distances? What might be analogous to global commodity chain analysis (an entire subfield tracing the dispersal of the moments of production across countries) for the non-commodity chain of global household production? How is produced wealth distributed, and what forms of governance, conflict, and negotiation accompany its distribution? How do global households organize gifting and other forms of exchange? What are the problems unique to

<sup>19</sup> Biju Mathew, personal communication, May 20, 2007.

global householding, and how might they be addressed? What kinds of gendered economic subjects are produced in the process of global householding? How does the global household function as an aggregate, composite, or collective actor on the world stage? Perhaps the most important question is, what are the unrecognized, untheorized, and unrealized powers and potentials of the global household as an international economic institution? Just as the focus of international political economy could potentially shift to include more than the global unfolding of capitalism, so political economic ontologies of power could be reworked to accommodate the power of what is small, dispersed, unorganized, and relatively invisible. Here we might turn to second-wave feminism for inspiration and the recognition that localized struggles can generate a globally transformative movement, one that is nowhere complete but everywhere ongoing, one in which most participants are “related analogically rather than organizationally and connected through webs of signification” (Gibson-Graham 2006b, xxiv). Academic research has the potential both to create webs of signification and to promote organized action among global households. Such research could initiate a feminist, postcapitalist international political economy, performatively constituting a transformative institution at the intersection of academic and popular discourse, policy formulation, and political activism.

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