

“Productive” Reproducers *The Political Identity of Mothering in Contemporary India*

The present article examines the discourses around motherhood in India, as an example of a Third World country that is both neo-liberal and anti-natalist. It unpacks the construction of motherhood within three dominant contemporary intellectual and policy paradigms: (a) gender and development theory, (b) anti-natalism/neo-Malthusianism, and (c) neo-liberalism and global capitalism. Central to the discourses contained in these traditions are the distinct ways in which motherhood and economic work are positioned against each other. This positioning, in turn, has significant implications for women's agency and political identity as mothers or workers. Fundamental gender and development theory embraces economic activity as the route to women's personal agency and collective political identity, as economic work connects with the public sphere; motherhood, in contrast, is private and not a primary source of agency. Within anti-natalism or population control agendas, motherhood is projected as a public and national concern, and “good mothers” or those mothers that have few children are also good citizens. Neo-liberalism based on the free-market principles of the 1980s/1990s ignores the relevance of mothering within its discourses of cost-effective society. Yet, ironically, it is women's mothering and caring roles that pick up the gaps in social services that are no longer funded by the state. Further, as part of the growing global capitalism, fertility is increasingly being converted into consumerist interests for promoting sales of contraceptives and other products. Overall, the article argues that these three discourses are in contradiction to each other and promote multiple constructions of motherhood in contemporary developing societies, all of which render women either as subjects or objects of markets and policy, and do not promote either individual or collective agency.

The present essay examines the discourses around motherhood in contemporary developing societies as characterized by (a) gender and development

theory, (b) anti-natalism/neo-Malthusianism, and (c) neo-liberalism and global capitalism. Each of these is an influential intellectual framework for designing programmes of development and, consequently, has significant material implications for women in the global south¹ women's lives as they cope with poverty. However, what is also important is that these paradigms have specific implications for prospects of agency and political identity—the ways that women and their advancement as a collective group are constructed are seen differently by these traditions. Underlying each of these discourses are particular ways in which unpaid, mothering activities and paid, economic activities are understood to be inter-related to political agency. In advancing their own formulae for women's empowerment, these discourses deploy core analytical concepts of public/private, productive/reproductive and political/non-political in distinct ways. This article argues that in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century, these three discourses are in contradiction and reveal a tension among decision makers about the meanings of political empowerment for women. For women in the global south, the consequences are that they are confronted with multiple messages about what their roles in society are: to be a mother or worker, i.e., a reproducer or a producer. Overall, this paper highlights the fluidity of motherhood as a political identity in the Third World/global south especially against a background of overpopulation and transition into the global market economy. The essay draws on examples from India, as a Third World state that is both anti-natalist and neo-liberal, to supplement the arguments made.²

Mothers in women/gender and development scholarship

The field of women/gender and development is officially accredited with having commenced in 1970 with the publication *Women's Role in Economic Development* by Ester Boserup. Until then, the widely-held view in international development was that women in the Third World/global south were solely mothers, carers and homemakers, i.e., they were mainly biological and social *reproducers*. Development programmes, when they addressed women, focused on better nutrition, better childcare, and better homemaking in order to make them better mothers and carers. Ester Boserup's (1970) work was a critical turn around in this thinking because she highlighted that women in the global south were also actively engaged in economic activity, that is, they were *producers* as well. She argued that women were being disengaged from the processes of development and modernization because their productive activities were not recognized by planners (Kabeer, 1994). India was no different. Vasavi A. R. and Catherine Kingfisher (2003) analyze the post-Independence Five-Year Plans—the economic policies in India—and point out that the first four Plans (1952-1974) failed to give any productive capacity to women at all.

In the logic of gender and development thinking, the purportedly 'natural' association of women with the mothering role has been key to their marginalization from economic activity. Women's mothering and caring activities

tend to confine them to the private/domestic space where their work is undervalued, unpaid and seen as unproductive (Beneria, 2003; Kabeer, 2003). Consequently, their engagement with the productive and economic sphere is sporadic. While women's undervalued mothering/caring roles have implications for (mis)allocation of resources within the household and community, what was emerging was that there are implications for political identity as well; the enduring connection with reproductive activity diminishes their prospects for claims to rights and justice akin to those who are more 'productive' citizens. Any chance for political assertion of women in the global south lay in engaging with non-mothering activities that are credible as productive, economic, and, consequently, political.

There were strong critiques of Boserup (1970) for presenting an economic work focused perspective of women's agency and ignoring the many links between women's work inside and outside the household (Beneria and Sen, 1981, 1982). Yet for the most part, based on Boserup's and other similar work during the 1970s and 1980s, women's empowerment and agency was framed around economic activity; women and their mothering role was an obstruction to attaining equality with men in development, and emancipating them from the culture-bound, traditional domestic sphere.

Thus, the default thinking in Women/Gender and Development scholarship, therefore, did not make allowance for motherhood as the direct basis for women's political identity in the global south. If anything, mothering was inimical to these discourses and detracted from women's prospects in a public sphere where economic activity was the currency for empowerment. Even today, aid agencies that support development programmes like micro-finance and skills training for jobs in the formal sector, emphasize that the main route out of poverty and social/economic exclusion is through economic work, not mothering.

Mothering and anti-natalism/neo-Malthusianism

In contrast to the gender and development discourses, anti-natalism (or the drive to reduce population size) projected motherhood in a completely different way. Given the urgency in many developing countries to reduce their population numbers, the capacity to be mothers positioned women in the centre of development debates. In India, these began in earnest as early as the mid-1950s with the start of family planning (or population control) programmes. The early programmes were a mix of social education and marketing of contraceptives, "persuasion" by government-appointed health staff, use of monetary and other incentives to discourage fertility, target setting for contraceptive use based on projections of demographic growth, and at its worst, coercion. By the 1970s, a norm of two children per couple had become popular and was adhered to variously around the country³ (Jolly, 1986; Rao, 2004).

The foundations of the anti-natalist programme were grounded in neo-Malthusian philosophy. Thomas Malthus (1798) was a clergyman known for his

1798 book *Essay on the Principle of Population*. The essay advanced his treatise that population growth, unless controlled, is likely to grow in geometric proportions compared to the growth of food and other resources that would only grow in arithmetic proportions. This situation, Malthus argued, was likely to lead to catastrophic results including starvation and end of humankind. Despite criticism of the Malthusian doomsday predictions, in the twentieth century, it picked up support again and population growth became perceived as one of the greatest barriers to economic growth. The threat of population growth overwhelming efforts to eradicate poverty in the global south is a major driver for large scale funding for population and development programmes.

Critics of such programmes have pointed out that beneath the technicalities of statistics and contraceptive-use data, it is women and their capacity to be mothers that is at the heart of anti-natalist programmes. Women's bodies are sites where population policies are implemented—whether it is sterilization after the birth of two children or insertion of intra-uterine devices (IUDs) for “spacing” births or supplementing ‘unmet needs’ for contraception—women become powerless to question the norms and authority of experts who define what mothering should be about (Hartman, 1995).

Further, in a country like India, population control policies and women's role in them took on a particular political shade. Since Indian Independence, population control has been associated with India's drive towards modernization—the inability to feed a rapidly growing population was writ large in the government's economic plans. India's underdevelopment was subtly constructed as being tied with women's ability to reproduce. Family planning was, therefore, positioned as being part of a narrative of socio-economic change and mothers were central to that narrative. Nilanjana Chatterjee and Nancy Riley (2001) argue that the archetypal woman subject of the Family Planning policy ideology was wife-mother, a construction that required them to conduct their personal matters of reproduction in a ‘publicly responsible’ way. Motherhood, not unlike being a soldier, was adopted as the basis of citizenship for women. A ‘good mother’ was a woman who did not have more than two children and who simultaneously was willing to be ‘modern’ by using artificial contraceptives. Being a ‘good mother’, in turn, was also about being ‘responsible citizens’ (Chaudhuri, 1995).

From the mid-1990s onwards, in the wake of the Cairo Conference, 1994, and the Beijing Conference, 1995, there were shifts in policy to make family planning more gender-sensitive. In India, the Reproductive and Child Health Policy (instituted in 1996) formally replaced the family planning policy and stressed quality, client-oriented services. In 2000, the National Population Policy set out the population control objectives to govern the country against a broad goal of informed choices for individual. Despite these proclamations, there is concern that the language of gender empowerment masks strongly anti-natalist objectives of the state (Ollila, Koivusalo and Hemminki, 2000; Rao, 2004; Simon-Kumar, 2006).

Thus, contrary to gender and development theory where reproduction is invisible and private, the fact of women's capacity to give birth is of great interest to anti-natalist Third World states. There are strict guidelines about how often and when in her life a woman can and should become a mother. From an anti-natalist perspective, mothering is more public than is often acknowledged, and reproduction is a "productive" activity as it is directly factored into economic, population, fiscal and anti-poverty policies.

Neo-liberalism and global capitalism

Neo-liberalism is a strand of economic thought that can be traced to the writings of Adam Smith and his ideas of *laissez-faire* commerce. Based on the belief that markets should be unfettered and allowed to bring their own balance into economies and societies, neo-liberalism found its ascendancy in the 1980s. In western countries, terms such as Thatcherism in the United Kingdom, Reaganomics in the United States and Rogernomics in New Zealand embodied the growing emphasis on greater individual and market freedom, minimal state intervention, and cost effectiveness as the bottom line for all economic and social activity. In developing countries, neo-liberalism was imposed from the 1980s in the guise of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The SAPs implemented the Washington Consensus in 1990, a package of reforms that included interest rate liberalization, removal of tariffs or barriers that would encourage foreign direct investment, greater focus on export-oriented production, introduction of user fees for social services and a redirection in public sector spending towards areas of high economic returns.

There is sufficient evidence now that demonstrates the gender disparities inherent in and caused by these neo-liberal reforms. Studies have shown that where public services (in health, education, food subsidies, etc.) had declined, women were worst affected. They were less likely to seek medical aid or be more likely to be pulled out of school, and reduce their food intake (among others, see Elson, 1991, 1992, 1998; Sparr, 1994; also, Bisnath, 2005). Equally, research showed that women's work in the reproductive sphere—as mothers and carers—had increased in direct response to the reduction of government funding for social and community services. Mothering/caring was being garnered as a means to fill in the gaps left by economic reform. Mainstream development agencies, at the time, advocated an "efficiency" approach—that is, working on the premise that development would be more efficient if women were involved (for free) in service delivery in the grassroots. This involvement of women was seen as associated with equity and in creating "economic agents." There was criticism of the use of women's roles in mothering to further economic agendas. As Diane Elson (1991) argued, women's reproductive work cannot be relied on to be endlessly "elastic." Vasavi and Kingfisher (2003) point to the adoption of the efficiency approach in India after neo-liberal economic reforms were adopted in 1991. In the *National Policy for the Empowerment of Women*

(Government of India 2001 cited in Vasavi and Kingfisher, 2003), women's empowerment was reiterated as paramount to government priority. However, as Vasavi and Kingfisher (2003) point out this empowerment was primarily "economic" and women were cast as "economic actors."

Thus, in a neo-liberal development society, several discourses around mothering and work started to emerge. Women's productive and paid economic activities were, once again, being promoted as the basis for empowerment. Simultaneously, women's reproductive activities were also drawn to support economic production as part of being efficient in development—yet, these contributions were unacknowledged, invisible, and unrecompensed. Janine Brodie (1994) pointed out that neo-liberalism pushed women back into a private realm that made it difficult to claim status as "citizens." To be a mother, in the neo-liberal discourse, was to eschew rights to citizenship.

There was a newer facet in which the neo-liberal discourse had further started to complicate how motherhood was conceptualized in developing societies. With the liberalization of markets and foreign investment, private pharmaceutical companies, both global and local, started to enter and expand the contraceptive market which were till then primarily regulated by the government. The start of social marketing by pharmaceutical companies radically changed the landscape of contraceptive choice. In India, more technologically-advanced contraceptives like Depo Provera, the Net-En injectables, Oral pills, and Emergency Contraceptive pills were available in the open market for sale in addition to the conventional range of condoms and IUDs. Furthermore, as with the language of consumerism in other products, there was an increasing use of the symbolisms of individual freedom, dynamism, and contemporariness associated with the buying and use of contraceptives. Fertility, and its prevention, was moving into the realm of consumer choice and rights away from a collective debate around social justice for mothers.

In addition, as part of its global capitalist framework in pharmaceuticals, India is seeking to attract companies to conduct pharma research (Maiti and Raghavendra, 2007). With the high levels of illiteracy in the population, high-technology industry support infrastructure, and skilled human resources, India is potentially an attractive place to conduct clinical trials for emerging drugs and contraceptives. The potential for medical abuse, understandably, is high and several cases of unethical trials in the past twenty years highlight the risks for women, especially poor, illiterate women. In the 1980s, two U.S.-based doctors were found to have conducted illegal trials of Quinacrine (anti-malarial drug) in India and other developing countries in order to sterilize women after similar trials were banned in the U.S (Rao, 1997, 1998, 2004). Quinacrine and its trial were later banned by the Indian Supreme Court. In 2000, women activists stopped the conduct of trials of the injectable contraceptive Net-En on women villagers (Bal, Murphy and Subrahmanian, 2000). The Government, in 2001, acceded to the injectable being introduced as a pilot project on grounds that it would give women more choices (*The Hindu*, 2001a, 2001b).

In 2003, researchers tested a breast cancer drug on young women to determine its effectiveness in infertility although the drug was banned for use for any purpose other than for breast cancer in post-menopausal women (Maiti and Raghavendra, 2007).

In summary, neoliberalism and global capitalism have raised complex issues for motherhood and women's agency in the global south. While the fiscally-constrained government-based economic reforms invisibilised the worth of mothering to the economy, on the one hand, the liberalization of markets and rise of consumerism, has constructed mothers (particularly, potential mothers) as a target niche market group. Women's reproduction is of interest to the contraceptive market and as such their political identity is based on their ability to be consumers of contraceptive choice.

Contemporary motherhood discourses in the global south: implications

As the arguments above have outlined, there are disparate discourses currently deployed in the global south around mothering or reproduction and its opposite, that is, work or economic production. The three paradigms considered here were the gender and development theory, neo-Malthusianism/anti-natalism, and neo-liberalism/global capitalism. The three paradigms have distinct discourses around motherhood and women's political agency: in traditional gender and development theory, motherhood was constructed as a barrier to political agency that could only be achieved through economic and productive activity in the public space. The neo-Malthusian framework brought motherhood into the "public" through population control programmes but this was, in large part, aimed at control and regulation of individual women's fertility. The neoliberal discourse co-opts women's mothering roles for economic activity without the attendant political agency that is supposed to follow. Where mothering has become publicly valuable is in the consumption of contraceptive products. Being a mother has once more been urged out of the domestic sphere, but it is not to the space of the "public" where political autonomy can be debated, but rather the private sector of industry and profit.

In all, it appears that there is a shift in the discourses around mothering. In conventional feminist theory, the private and the public are positioned as opposites (Okin, 1994; Fraser and Gordon, 1994) and the construction of citizenship based on polarized political identities of mothering and working. However, what is emerging as a peculiar facet of the late twentieth/twenty-first century is that the binary of "mother/worker," "producer/reproducer," and the "public/private" are no longer valid for women in the global south. Petchesky (2003) argues that neoliberalism does not widen the gap between productive and reproductive—it effectively erases them. Consequently, she argues, there is a constant incursion of the social into the lives of individuals. The permeability of these spaces render mothering and motherhood an ambiguity. In this contemporary era, motherhood is neither (but also, simultaneously) private and

public, a reproductive and productive activity.

The prospect for motherhood as the basis for political empowerment in contemporary times is not optimistic. Mothering spells multiple meanings for women in the global south—they are objects of the markets, subjects of population policy, and agents of development. For generations of feminists who proclaimed that the “personal is political,” the public space was the iconic realm of political freedom for women and their struggles were to make the public space more inclusive by integrating diverse women and the multiplicity of the activities that they are involved in, especially mothering. However, against the context of anti-natalism and neo-liberalism, the public-ness of mothering is more regulative rather than empowering, and seems to be removed from discussions of equity and social justice. On the flip side, the privacy (as well as privatizing) of motherhood is perhaps not likely to be beneficial to women either—it can contribute to ghettoizing motherhood into spaces of deprivation or abuse framed by ideologies of patriarchy. Private or public?—the language of empowerment permeates both the productive and reproductive activities of women till it is impossible to discern what political autonomy is anymore.

Joan Landes (1998) argues that feminists in the late modernity acknowledge that there is not one singular way to define the public or private space, and in fact, ongoing introspection into the differences among feminists on this issue would be intellectually and politically debilitating rather than productive. To step outside of these questions of boundaries and binaries, it would be beneficial to reframe the questions asked about contemporary motherhood. Rather than interrogating if motherhood is or should be public or private, productive or reproductive, it would be more meaningful to discuss which of these three discourses are dominant in current times, and who is benefiting from the particular meanings prevalent about motherhood in the global south. Equally important to raise in collective debate is how women in these societies can reclaim a meaning of mothering that is politically empowering to them.

¹The terms Third World and the global south are usually used to refer to nations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These terms are contentious and have political implications. The term “Third World,” given its association with low socio-economic development characteristics and cultural backwardness, is largely seen as derogatory and used with caution in feminist/gender literature. However, for academic purposes, particularly as used in this paper, it refers to a set of characteristics about states and their priorities in directing development policy. The term “global south” was coined by women in these countries as an empowering term to reflect their geo-political location, without falling into the stereotypes surrounding the Third World.

²India is considered to be a “heterodox” neoliberal development state; that is, while it has liberalized aspects of its economy, it has also continued with some welfare programmes aimed at reducing poverty.

³In states like Kerala, in south India, family sizes started to drop rapidly from the 1970s onwards whereas in several states in the north such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh, the fertility levels continue to be high.

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