



## Questioning women's subordination: cross-cultural insights from anthropology

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### Abstract

This review article<sup>2</sup> discusses several ways in which women's subordination has been addressed in various cultural contexts: from Thailand to Poland, Bulgaria, Greece and Egypt. The paper points to how the concept of gender intertwines with labour, consumption, modernity, migrant experiences, kinship, reproduction, personhood, ethics and religious practices. The cases brought to the fore reconceptualise the domination and resistance doublet and provide novel ways to conceptualize and address gender, not only as a constructed identity, but also as embodied performance. Without aiming to paint a detailed picture of feminist anthropology, the paper explores how ideas developed in these inquiries question the taken-for-granted assumption about the universality of women's subordination and challenge the emancipation prerequisite of feminist agenda.

### Keywords

Anthropology, ethnography, women's subordination, domination-resistance

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<sup>2</sup> Books and articles reviewed include: Lila Abu-Lughod - *The romance of resistance* (1990, American Ethnologist), Elizabeth C. Dunn - *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor* (2004, Cornell University Press), Kristen Ghodsee - *The Red Riviera. Gender, Tourism and Postsocialism on the Black Sea* (2005, Duke University Press), Saba Mahmood, *Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival* (2001, Cultural Anthropology), Mary Beth Mills - *Auditioning for the Chorus Line: Gender, Rural Youth, and the Consumption of Modernity in Thailand* (2001, Palgrave), Judith McGraw *Why Feminine Technologies Matter* (2003, John Hopkins University Press), Heather Paxson *Making Modern Mothers: Ethics and Family Planning in Urban Greece* (2004, University of California Press)

### **Early studies of women's subordination. Beyond dichotomies**

Feminist anthropology as a sub-discipline of cultural anthropology gained momentum in the 1970s<sup>3</sup> (Lewin 2006). Inquiries and writings of women anthropologists, crucial in feminist anthropology, attempted to balance the previously existing male-bias in anthropological scholarship that emerged from theory formulation and fieldwork practice. The most important contribution of feminist anthropology has been the increased awareness of women within anthropology, both in terms of ethnographic accounts and theory. Feminist anthropology has been intimately tied to the study of gender and its construction by various societies, an interest that examines both women and men (Lewin 2006).

Initially, the core assumption of feminist anthropology was the universality of sexual asymmetry, rooted in socialization, social structure and culture. The biological role of women in reproduction and the socially and culturally defined role as mothers, bearers and nurturers of children provided the basis for their subordination (Rosaldo 1974). Ortner (1974) argued that the universality of female inferiority emerged from the symbolical association of ideas of female as being closer to 'nature' than male, which is a category associated more closely to 'culture'. Women's role as child bearers makes them nature creators, while men are more associated with producing culture. Subordination works through the intertwining of ideas about the physiological nature, ascribed social roles and the psychic structure.

The universality of women's subordination came under heavy critique and became problematic because of the binaries (male/female, nature/culture, production/reproduction etc) on which it was based. This dualistic framework failed to understand women's position when translated to other cultural contexts. Moreover, class, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion were recognized as important mediators of gender, that diversify the category of women, and complicate the assumption that woman and man are clear-cut categories. Studies in feminist anthropology in the beginning of the 1980s propose a reversal of the earlier separation of biology and culture. Because people formulate social expectations based on the physical body, it is argued that sex is not a biological, but a social category, like gender. With the changes in anthropological inquiry in the 1980s (Ortner 1984), feminist anthropology underwent important analytical transformations as well, mainly influenced by practice theory and post-structuralism<sup>4</sup>. The former brought to fore the idea that all social activity comes down to praxis, which is about real people doing real things in processes of cultural production. In reaction to structural-functionalism principles,

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<sup>3</sup> Other chronologies include the contributions of female anthropologists in the US during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Elsie Clews Parsons, Alice Fletcher, Margaret Mead, Phyllis Kayberry, who sought to include women's perspectives in their inquiries (Morgen 1989).

<sup>4</sup> At times, feminist anthropology also drew from the theory of positionality and queer theory. The former criticises cultural feminism for essentializing female attributes, while the latter defines itself in opposition to the concept of 'normalcy' and challenges the normativity of heterosexuality highlighting the effects of socialization on sexual identity.

culture refers to the understandings, meanings and practices of people. Agency challenges the static character of systemic analyses and replaces systems with the dynamics of struggle and resistance. New modes of conceptualizing gender were formulated with respect to the more complex issues of the relationships between thought systems and individual action, and between ideology and material conditions (Lewin 2006). The focus turned to the operation of human agency within structures of subordination. Anthropologists looked at women's forms of resistance to the dominant male order, like subversions of hegemonic meanings of cultural practices and redeployments for women's own interests and agendas. As an analytical concept, gender was used to refer to male and female, the cultural construction of manhood and womanhood, and the relationship between them.

With its focus on power and modes of subjection, post-structuralism opened up new avenues in the study of representation by addressing the influence of historical, political, social, and cultural contexts in theory formation. The politics of representation, a core topic of inquiry, entailed the questioning of cross-cultural translation and the anthropologists' relationships with their informants.

### **Patriarchal authority and religious practices in non-Western contexts**

Influenced by post-colonial theory, feminist anthropologists in non-western settings shed light on the ethnocentric bias in the work of other feminists, questioning the idea that the so-called traditional arrangements organised and legitimized women's subordination. In turn, they embarked in conducting more particularistic and historically grounded studies that locate gender at the centre of analysis with the purpose of 'decolonizing' feminist studies (Mohanty 1986).

For example, Abu-Lughod's (1990) ethnographic account discusses how Bedouin women challenge historically dominant gender ideals of female modesty. They assert themselves in opposition to older generations through an increasing use of technologies of 'female attractiveness', like make-up and clothing. Simultaneously, gaining access to these femininity resources deepens women's dependence on their more economically powerful husbands. Women play on local relations of domination and create particular forms of resistance although these practices simultaneously reinforce their subordinate positions. Even if women experience these forms of resistance as emancipating, they entail women's enmeshment in yet other networks of power. In other words, subverting one form of power might engage women in yet other forms of domination. Complicating the study of gender relations with accounts from non-western societies, the author shows that relations of domination are rather complex and overlapping. Thus, it is argued that the study of gender, and particularly women's position in the wider society, needs to go beyond the simplistic registers of submission and patriarchy.

To question the workings of religious ideas and practices in the ways women produce pious selves, Saba Mahmood's (2001) ethnographic account of a women mosque movement in Egypt. The underpinning idea is that docility and submission to religious ideas and proper ways of doing things, like veiling and cultivating shyness, can

be thought of as a form of agency. Part of the Islamic revival, the movement enabled their extended inclusion in the practice and teachings of Islam. More recently, they argue that their activity is a response 'to the marginalization of religious knowledge under modern structures of secular governance' (p.205). The ways in which women interpret Islam teachings during their common sessions and enact social practices and forms of bodily comportment germane in order to cultivate an ideal virtual self in everyday life. Employing the gender performativity framework, Mahmood argues that women's modesty and practices within the mosque movement are not only markers of identity, but they are means through which they perform their *desired pious self*. For those women, veiling is a practice whose goal is the creation of a modest self. As such, the veil is both being and becoming a certain kind of person. Moral virtues are acquired through a coordination of outward behaviour and gestures with inward dispositions, the training of the body being connected with reason and emotions. To go beyond interpreting the virtues cultivated by these women as Islamist feminine passivity and submissiveness, Mahmood does not equate agency with resistance. Understanding the choices of women assumes that agency be decoupled from its liberalist underpinnings. Thus, agency is not conceptualised as resistance to domination, but 'as capacity for action translated in cultivation and performance of gendered Islamic virtues' (Mahmood, 2001:203). As the author puts it: 'the desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori' (Mahmood 2001:234). Therefore, subjects are culturally and historically located and their motivations for action need to be thought as mediated and produced in their context. The account shows that it is not enough to point to 'a tradition of female piety or modesty' to demonstrate women's subordination. Exploring traditions in relation to practical engagements and forms of life in which they are embedded, one can gain an understanding of subordination as it is experienced by the women who embody it.

### **Gender, modernities and postsocialist transformation. Playing on 'subordination'**

More recently, anthropological approaches of modernity embarked in questioning the grounds on which the traditional/modern dichotomy rested. Acknowledging that Modernity is a process and project of the 'Western world', anthropology focuses on the articulations of global processes with local forms and defines modernity as the cultural dimension of transnationalism and globalisation (Lewellen 2002). People at their locales appropriate it differently and rework categories of 'tradition' and 'modernity' in local idiom through their understandings and practices. Constructed within cultural, social, political, and economic relations of power between and among men and women, 'gender mediates and is mediated by Modernity/modernities' (Hodgson, 2001:8). Certain gender configurations and culturally proper styles of 'being modern' are valorised, while those seemingly rooted in 'tradition' become stigmatised. The gendered character of modernity is reflected in idealised constructions of masculinities and femininities of which people make use in their everyday encounters. Gender differences shape and are reshaped by cultural and politico-economic transformations of relationships between

workers, nation-states and capital (Hodgson 2001). In addition, these changes reconfigure power and socio-spatial relationships within the families and households, as in the following case discussed by Mary Beth Mills (2001).

The author addresses the complicated relationship between gender and modernity in the experiences of young women in Thailand. Because urban employment is the only means to access forms of commodity consumption, rural women migrate to enter waged labour. Ideologies of modernity and gender operate to frame the desires of young women and to channel their choices. *Thansamay* (modernity in Thai idiom) constitutes an important topic of urban elite discourse and mass-mediated communication. Media portraits and public entertainment programs provide icons of modern femininity that refer to physical attractiveness, personal independence, confidence and commodified styles. *Thansamay* styles and practices are constituted in relation to distinctively gendered forms of personhood. Appropriating these gendered images of modernity, rural migrant workers struggle to acquire desired goods that would denote material wealth and comfort associated with urban-based standards of progress. Ironically, these hegemonic models of modernity (*thansamay*) are consistent with patterns of gendered inter-generational relationships within rural households. More specifically, familial obligations differ in the cases of girls and boys' mobility to waged labour in urban jobs. Boys are expected to pursue migrant work as part of their (personhood) formation, while their material contribution to the rural household is less important. On the contrary, women's labour migration is not only restricted, but there are also enduring sexual associations if they are not able to provide the expected remittances. Even though women put up with overtime work in low-paid jobs, they still take urban employment because it combines 'their fulfilment of filial duties with a pursuit of *thansamai* style and personal autonomy' (Mills, 2001:46). They assert themselves from parental authority, gaining greater control over marriage decisions. Return visits represent key moments in the migrant experiences of women. They are not only occasions to fulfil their gendered familial obligations as daughters, but also performances of their newly acquired *thansamay* style. By bringing urban commodities to rural households, migrant workers simultaneously assert their *thansamay* status and affirm their commitment to the well-being of their parents. They mobilize symbolic resources to challenge the marginalizing urban discourses about the backward rural. In this sense, the account shows that the meanings of Thai modernity are not fixed, but reworked through the practices of migrant workers. However, this mode of participation in locally identifiable 'modern' arenas of cultural style and status poses a fundamental contradiction to the experiences of rural young women: 'the meanings of modernity desired to provide personal autonomy reproduce the exploitative structures in which they are enmeshed' (Hodgson, 2001:31). Even if women willingly assume urban employment, their exploitation as cheap, flexible labour force in the feminized garment industry is reproduced through the integration of Thailand's economy in global fluxes of capital.

Wider political and economic processes, such as privatization, have also been at work in reconfiguring women's roles in production and reproduction, reshaping gender

relationships (Gal and Kligman 2000). Men and women have been expected to assume particular jobs, while their experiences of changes within labour relationships, households and politics were significantly different. To address the gendered postsocialist transformation inflicted by privatization, Dunn (2004) locates her inquiry within a Polish baby-food factory. The author critically engages with both feminist theory and the conceptualization of domination and resistance to examine the gendered power relationships that workers' discourses create and/or reinforce. She discusses how technologies of post-Fordist organization of economy, such as accountability, accounting, niche marketing and quality control, were at work in the transformation of workers and labour organization within former socialist societies. Through the ideologies of kinship and motherhood that women bring to the factory they contest the transformations in labour discipline. Alima workers would frequently make use of ideas of kinship to describe both the privatization of the factory and their labour relations within the firm.

Firstly, Polish people and the media depicted the acquisition of Alima by the American corporation as a 'marriage between a poor, but beautiful Polish woman with an older, but richer American man' (Dunn, 2004:154). In a context in which privatization represented a novel phenomenon, it was difficult for employees to internalize the rapid changes undergone with what was claimed to be an uncomplicated transfer of property. Therefore, the author argues, this wedding metaphor represented a way of rendering an uncertain situation more comprehensible. Workers used kinship terminology that alluded to specific marital obligations as a strategy to bind the multinational corporation into an enduring relationship. Even if it does not preclude hierarchical relationship with a less powerful 'wife', people expected that the American corporation acted as husband and provided for his wife in order to meet husbandly obligations. Workers and lay Polish were making moral claims asserting expectations and obligations grounded in culturally imagined 'natural' and 'biological' social roles of 'wives' and 'husbands'.

In terms of labour relations within the factory, workers play on their gender and on ideas about femininity in Poland to counter quality control and efficiency measures. Women interpret what they do within the factory by resorting to their roles of mothers preparing food for children, rather than industrial workers making an abstract commodity. Work within the baby food company is conceived in relation to motherhood and the act of feeding children. Quintessential icons of femininity within the Polish tradition related to Catholicism and nationalism, ideas of motherhood emphasize that domestic work represents a key aspect of social reproduction. Workers use these ideas to assert themselves as the most qualified to do the line work, seeing their productive labour as an extension of their reproductive roles. Ideas about care expand to the workplace to discipline workers in maintaining quality standards by emphasizing the safety of children, and not some abstract qualities of the product. At the same time, women manipulate these ideas of motherhood and childcare to avoid layoffs, arguing that waged work in the factory contributes to the improvement of their children's future.

If the kin metaphors deployed by people are thought of as expressing agency, what apparently seems to be an acknowledged position of domination actually represents a

means through which workers emphasize the social character of these relationships, for they entail care and reciprocity. By insisting on maintaining their status as subjects of labor, workers at Alima renegotiated their objectification and commodification. They challenged the privatisation of persons by conceptualising the production process as a moral ('work should be for persons', p.170) and relational one ('production is a relation between people, not persons and things', p.172 ). In this sense, the value of their work derived from the uses of the products, rather than from their exchangeability. Dunn notes that, by dwelling on their embeddedness they refuse the commoditisation of persons, thus renegotiating the ways in which privatisation reconfigure workers' identities and their social position.

Partly similar to Dunn's ethnography, Ghodsee's (2005) work of Bulgarian women in tourism analyses the reconfiguration of another feminised industry of the socialist state-economies. This ethnography aims to challenge the commonly held assumption that the postsocialist change inflicted primarily on women's statuses, casting them in subaltern positions. Rather, the author looks at how the women employed in tourism make use of their socialist education and experience to assert themselves in the changing postsocialist economic arrangements. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and forms of capital, Ghodsee argues that the privatisation and marketisation of the labour market re-values education and experience of women in tourism through legislative transformation, the involvement of the Mafia, and foreign direct investments. Competition shapes the tourism labour market because it favours the more experienced women that entered these jobs during socialism. On the contrary, young female students struggle to make a career in tourism under these new conditions in which education is a strong marker of differentiation. These changes reinforced the feminisation of tourism and women's compatibility to do this work, the number of men taking jobs in this industry being significantly lower.

Importantly, Ghodsee does not fall into the trap of treating the category of women in a wholesale manner. To make this point clear, she critically approaches the import of feminism in Bulgaria, brought in through the activities of women's NGOs. Constrained by funding practices, their projects are based on Western concepts and understandings of the women's subaltern position. These mask women's participation and economic successes and the ways NGOs address the problems of women do not meet with the expectations of Bulgarian women, even less with their understanding of change. The reluctance of women to foreign expertise circulated through NGO projects stems from the fact that these aid programmes do not address the problems as there are experienced by women themselves. Instead of tackling unemployment, projects of women's NGO insist on issues generated in the formulation of granting, like domestic violence and sexual harassment. Moreover, they contradict the ways in which gender roles are constituted and performed in Bulgaria. Consequently, the projects of these NGOs fail to address the issues of women because they do not take into account the embeddedness women and men in multiple and various social moorings or other factors such as class and education. Nevertheless, a closer look at women's activities within

households complicates the commonly held assumption about their subordination even further.

### **Domesticity, reproduction and technology**

To expand the study of women beyond the production of gender asymmetries, feminist anthropologists have recently begun to engage in research that questions the gendered character of the private/public dichotomy. As such, they tackle female activities in order to debunk the masculinization of technology. On the other hand, the implications of biotechnologies on fertility control are approached to delve into transformations in how reproduction is experienced by women and politicised by nation states and professionals.

Employing a gender perspective on technology, McGraw's (2003) provides a comprehensive look at the full picture of technology, including tools, skills, and knowledges associated with females. She discusses how women in the US choose the fit brassieres, store particular objects at their 'proper' places inside the household, carry out class-specific labour and perform activities shrouded in the privacy of the bathrooms. These 'feminine technologies' are usually associated with women by virtue of their 'biology' (tampons, brassieres) and their social roles (kitchen utensils, household cleaning products). Borrowing from IT language, McGraw (2003) divides these feminine technologies into hardware and software. Hardware refers to ideas and consequences of changes in the wider political economy employed to define and divide certain 'proper' places within households. Software comprises knowledges and skills to carry out household chores like storing kitchenware and housework utensils, filling different places in the house, women's maintenance labour and cleanliness. She argues the predominance of software in feminine technologies renders the knowledge component invisible and less important. In addition, this invisibility is also an effect of the pervasiveness of the private/public dichotomy and the cultural association of technology with public, masculine endeavour. Consequently, there is a tendency to see activities generally deemed 'private as being inherently less technological because of a persistent association with femininity' (McGraw 2003:15). Secondly, because of the association of feminine technology with human biological functions, like the need for food, clothing, shelter, and hygiene, the aura of basic necessity hinders the possibility to view 'human creativity and social' choice in their actual performance. Because of the great detail with which she uncovers complex bodies of knowledge in cleaning and maintenance chores, for example, her article is a convincing argument to rethink the idea that women's work involves simple technology.

Another relevant avenue in the debate of gender construction and women's status have been the relationships between kinship, domesticity and reproduction (Gal and Kligman 2000). According to the two authors, reproduction intertwines with politics in several ways. Debates and controversy about reproduction reconfigure the relationships between the (nation-)state and its citizens. Discussion about reproduction, sexuality and childcare also 'codifies arguments about political legitimacy and the morality of the state'



and 'creates women as political group and specific political actors'. Beyond the state-reproduction relationship, Paxson's *Making Modern Mothers* (2004) aims to understand changes in ethics and practices of motherhood, through the lens of fertility control and reproductive practices. She introduces the concept of gender proficiency to discuss how women 'realise their nature', an intriguingly popular idiom for motherhood amongst the women she conducted fieldwork. Gender proficiency includes certain culturally constructed norms of doing things properly that shape ideas and practices about *being good at being a woman/ man*. More specifically, this ethical gendered self needs to be continuously proven and sustained through practice and ethics. In turn, ethics have a critical role in shaping how womanhood is constructed – thought about and practiced. Chronologically, Paxson distinguishes between three kinds of motherhood ethics: the ethic of service to the family and nation, the post-war ethic of choice that includes women's struggle for rights, and, thirdly, the ethic of well-being of women, conceptualised in the neoliberalist idiom of self-care and heightened through planning programmes. Paxson points out a clash between the rationale of planning programmes and the Greek *nootropia* that emerges from the different ways imagining ethical subjects and reproductive agency. While *nootropia* refers to a so-called collective and embodied mentality, planning programmes are underpinned by a decontextualized knowledge that remakes the ethic of choice into an ethic of well-being. From this perspective, the idiom of modernity contained in the planning discourse deems abortion as backward, part of the old-fashioned mentality of *nootropia*. Moreover, sex is rendered as pleasurable, but not crazy or risky, as people describe sexual experiences in local understandings. Contrary to how these programmes claim that fertility control is liberating, women think of it as another burden because planning is gendered feminine and it personalizes responsibility of birth control towards them. To understand this, Paxson looks at reproduction within a framework that comprises heterosexual relationships and not only women's experiences. Widening the perspective beyond the choices of women, she points that they actually challenge power relationships. Women contest assumingly modern bio-medical technologies of fertilization by arguing that contraception represents a burden that actually complicates their existence. Differentiating between *erotas* (sexual passion) and *aghapi* (love, commitment) they expect men to also take responsibility about the sexual act. Consequently, instead of taking contraceptive pills, they prefer to rely on 'traditional' means of contraception, like condoms and withdrawal, as a way to responsibly their partners by testing if they are suited for *aghapi*. Because women deem sex pleasurable and risky, planning ideas and practices furthers contradiction about how women think of themselves, act and evaluate the others. Thus, they reshape the ethic of well-being as framed by planning programmes in a different manner. Women want and decide to become mothers only when they are married and they feel able to express their nature of raising children properly. In this sense, *Making modern mothers* is a powerful ethnography that describes how biomedical technology is translated into everyday reproductive practices and interweaves with local ethics of motherhood.

## Concluding remarks

The paper aimed to cross-culturally illustrate the domination-subordination relationship, one of the main tenets of feminist anthropology, and to shed the light on the multiple ways in which the idea that women are universally subordinated is, at least, simplistic. By the use of various ethnographic accounts coming from different cultural contexts, the unifying aspect of feminist anthropology is that it focuses on the role, status, and contributions of women to their societies.

The critical contribution of ethnography in the study of gender is that it points out to how taken-for-granted feminist assumptions about the subaltern position of women are. They polish off historical and cultural specificity, but also neglect other categories that influence the position of women. Going beyond reifying woman as a homogenizing category, ethnographies constitute a strong argument for the idea that women do not suffer the same oppression simply because they are women. Ethnographic accounts bring to foreground women's subjectivities and do not assume that the ways in which gender relations work in certain settings have the same configuration if time and place are changed. Because subjectivities are at the core of such approaches, the people involved in processes of change constitute active agents that imagine, experience and act upon the ways in which transformation is shaped and shapes their life worlds. In this sense, ethnographic accounts try to bridge experiences of people with wider political economy processes. For example, Dunn's ethnography, discussed above, shows how gender metaphors and their actual uses in people's everyday lives have shaped labour market and reshaped the lives of Alima workers. The neoliberalisation of the Polish economy was contested through articulating the processes of change with local knowledge (coming from sources such as the long tradition of labour activism, socialism and philosophies of the Polish Catholic church).

As I pointed out above, the ethnographic perspectives elucidate the specificity and diversity of women's lived experience of transformation and the interplay of agency, structure, culture, history, and power in the production of gendered modernities (Hodgson 2001). The strengths of the ethnographic writing and anthropological analyses lay in the ways in which they point out to the cultural production of concepts. Such an approach was Mary Beth Mills' (2001) article on the production of the Thai modernity under the idiom of *Thansamay*, which is one of the ways in which anthropologists scrutinize seemingly fixed and inflexible categories, like men and women, motherhood, femininity and masculinity. In this sense, what anthropology brings to the fore is the cultural constitution of these concepts: how people understand, negotiate, employ, discuss, embody and strategize ideas and practices, the ethnographic inquiry proceeding at several locales.

In this sense, the 'domination and resistance' doublet has been amended in ethnographies that do not flatten out the nuances by deploying a normative and homogenizing conception of woman, as in the feminist agenda and earlier feminist anthropology. For example, ideas of kin, generally assessed as patriarchal discourses of

women's domination, were employed by women on the work line to resist objectification, as exemplified in Dunn's ethnography.

Ethnographies also move beyond language as the dominant mode of signification because participant observation recaptures and dwell upon non-linguistic and nontextual 'modes of expression and production such as visual images, aesthetic styles, practices, performance, gestures, and even smells' (Hodgson 2001). In the sense, the practices of women within the Islam revival movement in Egypt is a comprehensive example of how a clothing item, the veil, is part and parcel in the production of the pious self (Mahmood 2001). Capturing dynamics and agency in people's everyday encounters, ethnographic writing points out to the creative, yet sometimes contradictory, modes of reappropriations as they produce modernities. The strength of this inquiry is that it does not run the risk of being overly positive or extremely negative about global processes. On the contrary, it explores ambivalence, ambiguities, contestations and transformations as they are experienced and played on in everyday life. In the examples discussed in the paper, I also pointed out how women manipulate particularly the 'instruments of their oppression' to assert their value, to criticize their disembeddedness or to share responsibility.

In a concluding note, not discussing the construction of masculinity was, of course, a personal choice, though without a specific agenda. My aim was to point to the ways in which anthropology as a discipline gained from the inquiries of female anthropologists into the lifeworlds of women. However, gendering anthropological inquiries through defining it as 'not male' - a female anthropologist studying only alongside women, while a male anthropologist looking at men's subjectivities - is hardly useful because of the inherent risk of ghettoizing feminist anthropology (Moore 1988). Moreover, such an inquiry mirrors the situation that it set up to criticise: the androcentric bias deriving from men (male ethnographers) studying men (male informants). Focusing on the negotiation of gender and its interplay with other processes downplays this shortcoming.

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