What I propose to do is to highlight some of the points which were made in these two papers. Some of the general issues which concern me are the links between economic and political, theory and research, and between structure and social action. Both papers emphasize choice, but not choice in the pure sense but alternatives within structured constraints.

On the one hand, the "choices" of women to engage in paid employment are structured by the vagaries of economic development and underdevelopment and by the indirect and direct opportunities created. In this case, economic opportunities are created for certain age cohorts in a given place and time, and denied to other age cohorts in a different context. Similarly, as Roberts emphasizes, this development is not the result of blind economic choice but is the outcome of political decisions – decisions that, for example denied women the right to own productive property or politics which induced multi-nationals to locate in certain communities rather than others. These analyses, then, link the economic and the political, in the wider sense of the term. It is important to examine more than just the effects of economic development on the male work force.

On the one hand, the response to structured economic opportunities, particularly as they are affected by underdevelopment in the Atlantic region, occurs in the context of household reproduction and inequality. I think this is one of the most important aspects of the recent work undertaken by Pat Connelly, Barbara Roberts, and Martha MacDonald. The study of underdevelopment is incomplete unless attention is given to the linkages between social and economic reproduction, since responses to changed circumstances are determined in household units.

Here, again, the issue is the structural parameters, the life chances, within which life choices are made, and in particular the existence of deeply rooted male dominance. The studies show that the type of male workforce participation has an effect on women’s work, both of a paid and of an unpaid nature, since women still perform the bulk of domestic labour.

Pat Connelly and Martha MacDonald demonstrate the inadequacies of a purely economistic model which would predict increased female participation in wage work in cases where household income was lower, by demonstrating the effect of the stages of development in the community and the differential effects of these stages on women and men at different points in their life cycles.

The facts of inequality in household tasks are well documented. It is not just a division of labour, as evidenced by their observation that, given the opportunity, men still do little domestic work while, given the necessity, women perform considerably and proportionately more traditionally male household work. This speaks directly to real inequalities. Doing the dishes more often, which seems to be the only significant change for men, is hardly sufficient.

In sum, I think the most important element in the work of Connelly and MacDonald is the attention given to the process of reproduction, in a social sense, and the links between the paid economy and the organization of household work.

This is also one of the general themes addressed in the work of Barbara Roberts. In her analysis, she indicated that female subordination is the result of deliberate choices – it is “man-made,” using the term as she does, not in its improper generic sense, but in its proper gendered sense. In short, it is male choice that affects women disproportionately.

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One interesting point concerns the general issue of the necessity of female oppression under capitalism. Roberts asserts that, “it is upon women’s work that the economies and entire societies of Canada and other countries depend.” Women’s work is necessary, if not sufficient.

Here the key element is history. It is possible to construct a theoretical model in which the un-paid reproduction of society, which Roberts argues is necessary for capital accumulation, can be done equally by members of either gender – short of physical reproduction, which is a necessary limiting case. In this somewhat more restricted case, female oppression would not appear theoretically to be a necessary element of the capitalist mode of production, and female equality is theoretically possible under capitalism.

This type of speculation, however, flies in the face of historical reality. Regardless of abstract theory, the structure of capitalist societies, created from the ground of previous forms of exploitative societies, has reproduced the kind of gender-based “apartheid,” using Roberts’ term, inherited from the past if, in fact, it has not deepened the division. Social reproduction under capitalism continues to reproduce structured gender inequality. It is the historical focus of Roberts’ work that demonstrates the necessity, under present conditions of capital accumulation, for the oppression of women. It is important to call attention to all the contextual social factors that undergird the rather limited profit-driven components of capitalist societies. Not everything is for sale, and what isn’t for sale is absolutely essential for profitability.

Second, what is of interest here is the use of a more macro-methodological approach. A dual conception is usefully applied, including not just absolute earnings but income relative to living standards over time. The findings are striking, if not unexpected, and the data are very useful. I suppose I am intrigued by the questions which Roberts’ work will eventually answer, such as the roots of these inequalities so well documented, and the issue of how many women, in the past, could have chosen self-sufficiency, although the latter question should be addressed in the context of both material and ideological structures.

Two general findings stand out in my reading. First there is the point that gender inequalities have increased over the course of the century, particularly with respect to the bottom 40 per cent. The second is that, over the same time frame, there seems to have been some increase in the opportunities for some female self-sufficiency, at the single subsistence and the living family wage levels. This finding makes it important to distinguish between male and female wages within a domestic unit since women’s choices are constrained by economic and other dependencies, for a variety of reasons; or, more fully, as Roberts puts it, they are constrained by “subordination.” The question is never a purely economic one.

Finally, I think that the most intriguing frontier of research and theoretical elaboration – I would go further and say that the most exciting development in contemporary sociology – is the question of the oppression of women relative to class in its historical and developmental manifestations. We have heard about the work of three women who are central to this elaboration and development.