



## Solidarity Economy Under a Feminist Lens: A Critical and Possibilist Analysis

*Isabelle Guérin, Isabelle Hillenkamp, and Christine Verschuur*

Production, exchange and redistribution practices based on solidarity—i.e. on voluntary interdependent, inclusive and egalitarian relationships—can be found in almost all areas of economic activity, from agriculture to

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I. Guérin (✉) · I. Hillenkamp

French Institute of Research for Development (IRD), Centre for Social Science Studies on African, American and Asian Worlds (CESSMA), Paris, France  
e-mail: [isabelle.guerin@ird.fr](mailto:isabelle.guerin@ird.fr)

I. Hillenkamp

e-mail: [isabelle.hillenkamp@ird.fr](mailto:isabelle.hillenkamp@ird.fr)

C. Verschuur

Anthropology - Sociology and Gender Center, The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland  
e-mail: [christine.verschuur@graduateinstitute.ch](mailto:christine.verschuur@graduateinstitute.ch)

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handicraft, manufacturing, finance, social and care services. These practices privilege the quest for solidarity (among workers and producers, between producers and consumers, between locations and between generations) over individual (or group) profit and rent-seeking behaviour (Eme & Laville, 2006; Guérin et al., 2011; Servet, 2007). More or less successfully, solidarity economy (SE) practices aim at (re)inventing non-capitalist and non-domestic social relations. Starting from management forms that allow workers to appropriate (or re-appropriate) the means of production and build (or reactivate) social dynamics that counter individualism and greed, they create the possibility to organize social reproduction in a way in which “all persons’ capabilities and the quality of all lives” matter (Coraggio, 2009). SE practices also aim at making room for debate, thus associating democracy and the economy, and bringing about new ways of contesting institutions and public and development policies. The inseparability of these two dimensions—economic and political—is what distinguishes SE from other proposals, such as the “social economy”, “inclusive economy”, “social enterprises” or “social business” (Laville et al., 2020).

Long ignored, SE practices have received growing attention in the last decades. In Latin America, interest in SE has been part of a broader paradigm shift around the notion of the “popular economy”, which turned attention away from the formal/informal economy debate to consider all forms of work, regulated or not, from the point of view of their contribution to the reproduction of life (Coraggio, 1994, 2006; França Filho et al., 2009; Nuñez, 1996; Razeto & Calcagni, 1989; Sarria & Tiriba, 2006). In Brazil, in particular, SE has been conceptualized in terms of self-management, differentiating itself both from wage labour and from small-scale informal enterprises (Singer, 2000; see also: Lemaitre, 2009). In Andean countries, SE has been discussed in relation to “community economy” and the “good life” model (*buen vivir*) as a potential alternative to “capitalist modernity” (Hillenkamp & Wanderley, 2015; Ruiz-Rivera, 2019). This paradigm shift has echoed the renewed interest in the English-speaking world of a livelihood approach to local economies in poor neighbourhoods and communities (Hillenkamp et al., 2013). Here too, authors emphasize actors’ multiple strategies and creativity (Hull & James, 2012), their need for protection (Cook et al. 2008; Kabeer 2010) and security (Krishnaraj, 2007; Shiva, 1996). While issues concerning the relationship to the capitalist mode of production (Gaiger, 2003; Singer, 2000) and mechanisms of internal competition

and domination (Coraggio, 2006) are not ignored, the reproduction of life (and not only market mechanisms and capital accumulation) is at the centre of these analyses (Morrow & Dombrowski, 2015). As a concept, SE is less frequently used in the Anglophone world where concepts like “human economy” (Hart et al., 2010), “alternative” or “community economies” (Gibson-Graham, 2014), “people’s economy”, or “hybrid” models combining “struggle” and “development” are more common (Kabeer et al., 2013). In continental Europe, SE has also been conceived as part of a new “welfare mix” (Evers, 1995; Pestoff, 1998) and of a “plural economy” (Eme, 1991; Laville, 1994; Nyssens, 1996; Roustang et al., 1997) that links market, state, household and community resources to address the unemployment and the welfare state crisis. At an international level, growing interest has been evidenced in publications, conferences, laws and the creation of public institutions for SE. Within the UN System, UNRISD created an Inter-Agency Task Force on SE in 2013. Given the challenges of inequality and climate change, the UN has put forward SE as an alternative model of production, financing and consumption (UNRISD, 2014; Utting, 2015).

However, apart from a relevant yet limited body of feminist literature on solidarity economy, the rising awareness of SE among academics and politicians remains largely gender-blind, despite the fact that they are highly gendered and that women play a major role in it (see Chapter 2). This literature was mainly developed in French-, Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking circles and has often remained inaccessible to English-speaking researchers and actors (Guérin et al., 2019). Moreover, quantitative evidence is scarce because official definitions of SE, when they exist, most often exclude a large number of female-led initiatives. In France, the only data available concern the social economy, in which women represent 65% of workers (Observatoire national de l’ES-CNCRES, 2012). The social economy in France is defined on the basis of the status of non-profit organizations (associations, cooperatives, foundations), which does not necessarily mean that practices are solidarity-based (Laville, 2010). In Brazil, a 2010–2012 census found that nearly 44% of those affiliated to the 20,000 initiatives included in the National Information System on SE were women. But this figure is certainly underestimated due to the fact that many women participate in small-size initiatives, which have not been registered in the census. In addition, in cases where the whole family takes part in a SE organization, only the male head-of-family is generally registered (Nobre, 2015).

Although quantitative evidence is lacking, field observations show that a large number of sub-sectors within SE are predominantly female-based (Hillenkamp et al., 2019). Collective food services are largely, and many times even exclusively, female (Anderson, 2015; Hersent, 2015; Ndoye, 2014), as are food processing cooperatives in low-income communities (Hainard & Verschuur, 2005; Ypeij, 2002). Women are very active in specific fair-trade value chains (Charlier, 2006; Saussey & Elias, 2012), barter clubs and social currencies (Saiag, 2015). They make up the majority of workers in environment and housing improvement initiatives—parks, low-income housing, sanitation, waste management, water management (Bisilliat, 1995; Haritas, 2014; Saussey & Degavre, 2015; Suremain, 1996; Verschuur, 2005, 2008, 2012), child-care and elder-care organizations and cooperatives (Fournier et al., 2013; Fournier, 2017; ILO, 2015; Suremain, 1996) as well as health care mutuals and savings and credit unions (Chatterjee, 2015; Fonteneau, 2015; Johnson, 2015; Sudarshan, 2015). In rural areas, women play an active role in subsistence agricultural cooperatives (Angulo, 2011; Guétat-Bernard & Saussey, 2014; León, 1980) and agroecology (Hillenkamp & Nobre, 2018; Prévost, 2015).

This is not surprising since these activities are related to the enlarged reproduction of life and reflect the gendered nature of work in private, public, domestic, community and market spheres (Chapter 2). This overrepresentation has often been perceived as the sign of the overburdening and undervaluing of women's work and as another mechanism of reproduction of unequal work distribution. This perception is particularly legitimate, given that jobs within non-profits' sectors, which offer the lion's share of work in the SE, are often lowly paid in mediocre working conditions (Saussey & Degavre, 2015). At the same time, this overrepresentation of women has also been seen by some as a sign of new and innovative forms of wealth creation that are more inclusive and egalitarian. In the updated version of their book *Gender, Development and Globalization*, Lourdes Benería, Günseli Berik and Maria Floro consider SE a promising path to build pro-women alternatives to neoliberalism (Benería et al., 2016, 242–243). Our empirical observations lead us to be more nuanced, and to ask *under what conditions* SE can offer transformative and sustainable paths for feminist social change.

In this chapter, we suggest the need to develop a dual perspective of a feminist analysis of the solidarity economy: one that is both critical *and* “possibilist”, by considering at the same time the violence of

domination and the possibility to resist it, the effects of structures and the existence of interstices for change (section “[A Critical and Possibilist Epistemology](#)”). This stand is necessary in order to account for the complexity of the processes of change, the tensions and sometimes the contradictions that the initiatives under study are facing, and to do justice to them by avoiding to summarily oppose “good” and “bad” practices. In addition, and as Jean-Louis Laville shows in this book (Chapter 12), developing such a position requires broadening our understanding of the economy beyond the market and the capitalist sphere and of the political beyond the sphere of the state and public authorities. The plural approach to the economy, inspired in particular by Karl Polanyi, revisited through a feminist perspective, offers a framework for understanding the economy, including the central question of social reproduction, considering both the mechanisms of domination and the possibilities for building spaces of resistance (section “[Broadening Our Approach to the Economy: Social Reproduction from a Plural Economy and Feminist Perspective](#)”). On this basis, the SE initiatives presented in this book, combined with examples from the literature, allow us to refine our analytical framework by identifying four main processes—not exhaustive nor mutually exclusive—through which such spaces can be constructed (section “[Solidarity Economy as Reorganization of Social Reproduction: Avenues Opened up by the Case Studies](#)”). Finally, a broad and feminist approach to the political process, paying attention to the public spaces of debate at different levels and the multiple intersections with the economy, allows us to understand whether and how social reproduction can be politicized (section “[Politicizing Social Reproduction: Public Action from Autonomous to Instituted Spaces](#)”). These two broad approaches to economics and politics are inseparable in understanding the conditions for social change and form the basis of the feminist approach to solidarity economy that underpins our collective research.

## A CRITICAL AND POSSIBILIST EPISTEMOLOGY

We propose a critical analysis to examine the nature of social relationships that drive SE practices, and how they interact with dominant power relationships. Our analysis questions the way in which SE initiatives liberate women from confined spaces or on the contrary, close them in; the way in which they reinforce or even generate inequalities—not only gender, but also class, caste, race, religion or ethnicity. It questions to what

extent they are substituting—at a lesser cost—local, national or supra-national public initiatives, and the way they serve as vehicles of globalized value chains and even extremist religious movements (Selim, 1988; Sen, 2007). However, focusing on power relations only has several pitfalls. We run the risk of “deserting the field of real social struggles” by ignoring the “subjects’ capacity for cultural action” (Verschuur & Destremau, 2012, 9). The critical stance, when it fails to identify the seeds of social change present in existing initiatives, also leads, paradoxically, to a “fundamentalism of alternatives”, consisting in “[rejecting] proposals born of capitalism that nevertheless pave the way for a non-capitalist orientation and that create solidarity enclaves within the system” (de Sousa Santos & Rodriguez, 2013, 133; see also: Dacheux & Goujon, 2011, ch. 3).

This is why a critical analysis needs to be combined with a utopian view that explores the potential of SE to “overcome the social and economic limitations imposed by reality” (Cattani, 2006, 653). Exploring potentialities rather than certainties echoes the epistemology of “possibilism” elaborated by Albert Hirschman (2013, Chap. 1), and his “bias for hope” (Hirschman, 1971). In particular, the modalities and range of “connections between economics and politics is limited only by the ability of social scientists to detect them” (Hirschman, 2013, 10). While dominant theories of social change are usually restricted to social regularities, Hirschman’s claim for a “passion of the possible” (*ibid.*, 21) draws attention to the part of unexpected and even improbable change. Exploring all the forms of interactions between economics and politics opens up spaces for alternatives that may not have been imagined before.

The paradigm of social innovation, which emerged in the 1980s in the face of the limitations that became evident in the narrow and deterministic conception of social change in the theories of modernization, contributes to the possibilist approach. The approach developed in particular by the Centre for Research on Social Innovation (CRISES) in Canada has drawn attention to the capacity for change of civil society actors and to the potential of solidarity and not just economic growth (Klein et al., 2014). Particular attention has been paid to non-market logics, based on the principles of reciprocity and self-sufficiency (Moualert & Nussbaumer, 2014), although the question of the relationship between solidarity and non-solidarity ethos in social innovation should not be lost sight of, as should the capacity of local initiatives to trigger a transformation of social relations (Hillenkamp, 2018). These questions have been explored in depth in recent literature on transformative social innovation

which studies the complex relationships between social innovation and transformation at different levels, in relation to empowerment processes (Avelino et al., 2019) and social movements (Callorda et al., 2020).

Possibilism consists of substituting scepticism with a “sociology of absences” and a “sociology of emergences” (de Sousa Santos, 2016). The sociology of absence aims at revealing what has been produced as “non-existent” by the dominant categories of knowledge underpinned by a monocultural logic. It deconstructs this logic, by showing that it recognizes only one form of (linear) temporality, only one form of spatiality and politicization (namely scaling up), only one form of social classification and differentiation and only one form of economy (judged by its material productivity). In addition, the sociology of emergences focuses on possibilities and capacity contained in other forms of knowledge and trajectories. Possibility “has both a dimension of darkness insofar as it originates in the lived moment and is never fully visible to itself and a component of uncertainty that derives from a double want: (1) the fact that the conditions that render possibility concrete are only partially known, and (2) the fact that the conditions only exist partially” (de Sousa Santos, 2016, 183).

Ultimately, a critical and possibilist epistemology involves recognizing and embracing an irreducible tension between emancipation and the gradual, hesitant and sometimes ambiguous nature of change. This stand posture is not straightforward, since it involves combining epistemological traditions which are often thought to be contradictory. These traditions pay attention, on the one hand, to subjectivities, life experiences, leeway, resistance and processes of change at the individual and collective level, and, on the other, to power dynamics and structures that are a constant source of differentiation, inequalities, exploitation and domination.

### BROADENING OUR APPROACH TO THE ECONOMY: SOCIAL REPRODUCTION FROM A PLURAL ECONOMY AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

We have seen in the first chapter how the concept of social reproduction can help us broaden our understanding of the capitalist economy, explaining how the latter relies on the articulation with the domestic economy to increase its prosperity. Some Latin American theorizations of

solidarity economy, situated within heterodox Marxist conceptual framework, have discussed the possibilities of solidarity economy as a mode of production that would not be subordinated to capitalism. This leads us to the central question of how to identify the conditions of possibility of this non-subordination to capitalism, through a different articulation of social relations of production. Karl Polanyi's substantive approach to the economy, revisited by feminist readings (Benería, 1998), offers some leads.

By recognizing four economic principles—the market, redistribution, reciprocity and householding—Karl Polanyi's substantive approach to the economy opens up a pluralistic view of the many ways to “practice the economy” (Polanyi, 1983, Chapter 4). These four principles, called by Polanyi “principles of economic integration”, describe how economic institutions and practices are integrated into social relations. Each is supported by specific institutional patterns: the pattern of centrality in the case of redistribution and of symmetry in the case of reciprocity; the market is based on the meeting of a group of supply and a group of demand; and householding obeys particularly to the logic of autarchy in “closed” groups, such as domestic groups or others. This fourth principle, which disappeared from several texts of Polanyi after *The Great Transformation*, is essential for understanding how the organization of the economy integrates social reproduction (Hillenkamp, 2013).

In order to analyse the plurality of the economy in a nuanced way, it is necessary to consider that the principles are not embodied in the institutions in a pure way. The principles are ideal-types or abstract models. The institutions are concrete sets of historically and socially installed norms that guide practices. Institutions are permeated by various principles, which create tensions and even contradictions within them. Households, for example, do not obey solely to householding as a principle of economic integration, but are submitted to some degree to market logics, to forms of redistribution, particularly through social policies, and in certain cases to obligations of reciprocity, typically in communities or in mutual aid networks.

SE represents the possibility to democratize the social relations that underlie the principles of economic integration. Moving away from a common interpretation of Polanyi's principles as simple forms of exchange, we consider them, in line with Servet (2014), as ideal-typical forms of *interdependence*, of which certain modalities correspond to solidarity relations, that is to say to voluntarily consented interdependences of



egalitarian type. In this theoretical approach, none of the four principles is by nature solidarity-based, but each one entails solidarity and democratic modalities. The construction of the solidarity economy represents the dispute for a more democratic and solidarity-based organization of the reproduction of life, which takes place both in the sphere of families and communities, in those organizations directed towards production and the market, and in the sphere of social policies and the relationship with the state (Hillenkamp, 2019).

This approach is meaningfully informed by critical feminist studies, which have deconstructed the dominant categories of economic knowledge by denouncing their gendered, hierarchical and normative nature, as well as the blind spots and the inequalities that result from them. While there are various schools of feminist economic thought (and differences), several elements may be retained for our purpose.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, feminist scholars showed that domestic labour, whose value and social utility are invisibilized, is indeed work (Benería, 1998; Combes & Devreux, 1992; Delphy, 1970; Esquivel, 2012). They explained how the separation between production and social reproduction was introduced with the capitalist mode of production. They also highlighted how maintaining domestic social relations of production actually feeds capitalist accumulation (Federici, 2002; Meillassoux, 1975, 1984; Pérez Orozco, 2014; Verschuur, 1986). In addition, feminist anthropologists have deconstructed the concept of “reciprocity”, showing its role in the construction and hierarchization of masculinities and femininities, as well as other forms of social differentiation (Strathern, 1988; Weiner, 1976, 1980). Post- and decolonial feminist scholars have further deconstructed the category of “woman”, showing how gender is intertwined with class, race, caste, religion, sexual preference and other belongings (Lucas dos Santos, 2016; Viveros, 2015, 2019). They deconstructed the idea of emancipation, denouncing the narrow, arbitrary and normative definitions of autonomy and wage labour in some Western feminist currents (Mohanty, 1984, 2003; Spivak, 2003; Verschuur & Destremau, 2012). Feminist development studies have also denounced the “triple role” of subaltern women, who combine (re)productive work in their families and communities and the management of the commons (Anderson, 1992; Kabeer, 1994). They have shown the ambiguities and in many cases the limits of so-called development policies aimed at supporting these women’s collectives by inserting them into the market,

without properly considering their impact on non-market economic practices (Cornwall et al., 2007). In the name of emancipation, these policies often resulted in exploitation, dispossession and a new form of co-opting unpaid labour force (Molyneux, 2007).

In other words, feminist studies have widened the spectrum of oppression and empowerment to a range of economic principles and contributed to revisiting the reading of plural economy. A decisive contribution of these studies is to show that it would be wrong to idealize “embeddedness”, through which market principles are subordinated to non-market principles (reciprocity, redistribution and householding), given that the latter may also operate under oppressive conditions. It would also be a mistake to vilify disembodiedness, since the market can also be a vector of emancipation (Fraser, 2013). The concepts of “market”, “state”, “community” and “household” are often fetishized, understood abstractly as normative institutions that generalize and caricature their presumed character (regarded as either alienating or emancipatory, depending on the school of thought) prohibiting any empirical investigation. Yet none of them ever operates in isolation and none of them never represents purely any economic principle. Each institution is permeated by varying configurations of the four economic principles. It is precisely the extent to which the institutions and the ever-mixed principles that underlie them are submitted to the principles of democracy and equality that defines the more or less oppressive or liberating dimension of economic activities.

### SOLIDARITY ECONOMY AS REORGANIZATION OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION: AVENUES OPENED UP BY THE CASE STUDIES

Based on this broad approach to the economy, we identify in the case studies presented in this book and in some other examples in the literature different modalities by which SE initiatives are concretely reshaping social reproduction relationships in a more egalitarian and sustainable way. These learnings deserve to be integrated into the analytical framework of this book.

*A Precondition: Overcoming the Separation Between “Reproduction” and “Production”*

Overcoming the separation between “reproduction” and “production” as well as the articulation between the domestic and capitalist economies is a precondition to reorganizing social reproduction in solidarity-based initiatives. As we have seen in Chapter 2, it is exactly by maintaining this articulation that the global system reproduces itself, largely based on the exploitation of subaltern women’s labour. Echoing other women workers’ initiatives in various parts of the world (Kabeer, 2008; Kabeer et al., 2013), specific forms of female unionism in Tamil Nadu presented in this book (Chapter 4) show that improving women’s livelihood necessarily requires an approach to the economy not limited to monetary production, but encompassing the various facets of social reproduction. The ultimate goal of these unions was to improve the working conditions of women workers in the informal economy. But unions’ leaders were quick to understand that this improvement requires first and foremost “taking up issues such as potholes in roads, open drains, the intermixing of drinking water and sewage, garbage heaps on public streets that grew by the day and street lights that did not work”, which are left aside by a narrow approach to the economy limited to the sector producing direct monetary value.

Conversely, the case of Bolivian producers’ associations confirms that a “productive” bias severely limits their potential for action (Chapter 6). This case study shows the weight of local institutions that perpetuate the perception of social reproduction as a private issue, separate from supposedly “real production” or “real economy”, and to be solved through women’s work at the household level. The case study shows that while mixed producers associations (men and women) in the agriculture and livestock sector enhance the value of production through specialization, quality improvement, the centralization of products and collective sales, they remain alien to the issues of work at home and for social reproduction. By contrast, female-only associations, in the sectors of bakery, greenhouses and handicrafts, help women breaking isolation and generating a space of conviviality, close solidarity and moral support, but they do not automatically question the privatization of social reproduction issues, nor do they generate common forms of management of social

reproduction. Time constraints and distance, but also the lack of conception of oneself as a worker and subject of rights are important limiting factors.

### *Communalizing Social Reproduction*

The expansion of capitalism today is still based on the separation of producers from their means of (re)production. The global economy relies on a major restructuring of social reproduction, with continuing dispossession, offensives against subsistence agriculture and huge migration of workers. Sharing this analysis, philosopher Federici proposes a politics of the commons and *commoning* as the foundation of new forms of social reproduction (Federici, 2002, 2011). Moving away from any essentialist approach, in particular a positivist understanding of common goods, based on their presumed intrinsic qualities (see also: Dardot & Laval, 2014), she defends a political approach, geared towards the process of building commons from the emergence of political subjects and of communities understood through “a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation and of responsibility to each other and to the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals” (Federici, 2011, 7).

*Communalization represents a first modality of reorganizing social reproduction relationships in a more equitable and sustainable way* that can be observed in this book through the examples of child-care community centres in marginalized urban neighbourhoods in Buenos Aires (Chapter 8) and of women fish-sellers association in Udupi, India (Chapter 9). In Udupi (Karnataka, India), women fish-sellers have created an association in order to protect themselves against the competition from supermarkets. At the same time, the association has collectivized some aspects of social reproduction, through internal microcredit, medical insurance and mutual support for child-care. In Buenos Aires, child-care (education, recreation, nutrition) is achieved collectively by community centres. This allows to share the work of social reproduction and to revalue it, both materially and symbolically. Collectivization allows for the “de-familialization and de-commodification” of “child-care in a structural way” (Chapter 8).

Food preparation in collective kitchens is another example of communalization. Examples from South America and West Africa in the literature show how these experiences have contributed to food security and to relieve women of some of their domestic work (Anderson, 2015; Angulo,

2011; Ndoye, 2014). Meal preparation is often time consuming for different reasons, namely little or no equipment combined with culinary traditions that call for lengthy preparation and cooking times. Collective kitchen allows women to save time and money and is sometimes connected to an effort to use short circuits to achieve food sovereignty at a local level, as is the case in Senegal (Ndoye, 2014).

### *Engaging for the Sustainable Reproduction of Life*

When women's livelihood depends upon the broader reproduction of human and non-human life, the reorganization of social reproduction forces them to engage into the *preservation of the broader reproduction of life, including the necessary natural resources*. The feminist critique (Carrasco & Tello, 2012; Pérez-Orozco, 2014) here intersects with the ecological critique of the capitalist mode of production: capitalism cannot function without social reproduction work, which it nevertheless devalues at the risk of destroying it; nor can it function without the extraction of "natural" resources (energy and materials) and the production of waste, for which it intends neither to pay the price nor to respect the limits (Herrero, 2016). In this sense, the labour/capital conflict must be extended to the broader life/capital conflict (Osório-Cabrera, 2016).

This second modality of reorganization of social reproduction is illustrated in this book through the case studies in Chengalpattu (Tamil Nadu, India, Chapter 5) and in Vale do Ribeira (Brazil, Chapter 10), where the unsustainability of the reproduction of life was a starting point of women-led SE initiatives. In both cases, women's primary objective was to defend their livelihood, but they quickly realized that this meant first and foremost fighting against massive extractivism (sand, forest) by private capital, often in complicity with the state. In Vale do Ribeira, the defence of livelihoods has also meant the need for women farmers and their communities to oppose measures to evict local populations from protected areas established by the state, demonstrating their contribution to the sustainable reproduction of forest ecosystems.

### *Alternative Modes of Appropriation of Work*

Thirdly, the reorganization of social reproduction means *alternative modes of appropriation of work, which in turn require a revaluation of women's work* (see Chapter 2). Rejecting the exploitation of women's labour

in the domestic economy and/or its underpayment in the capitalist mode of production implies a broader and richer vision of economic value, including *use values*, as feminist scholars have shown. How should producing food in family gardens, selling fresh fish, child-care of domestic work be valued? In Vale do Ribeira (Brazil), the feminist NGO SOF who accompanies peasant women involved in agroecology set up an accounting system aimed at quantifying and therefore valuing women's production. This system, which had been proposed by the Women's Group of the Brazilian National Agroecological Network, includes not only the sold production but also what is self-consumed, given and bartered, which until then had been invisible because it is not monetarized nor marketed. It turned out that "family consumption accounted for 51% of the total number of records in the notebooks and 28% of total production when assigned a monetary value" (Chapter 10). The calculation of the monetary equivalent of women's production has greatly contributed to taking it out of the invisibility of domestic work. Combined with the NGO's construction of new sales opportunities, in particular through a network of responsible consumers in São Paulo, this has served to change the way in which women farmers value and reconsider their work.

The case of women fish-sellers in Udupi (India) can serve as a counter-example (Chapter 9). By creating an association in order to protect themselves from competition from private capital, women managed to retain a monopoly on the sale of fish, and this is a remarkable result. But by perceiving their activity of selling fish as an extension of their domestic tasks, and not as a productive activity per se, women fail to gain a fair monetary recognition for the value of their work, remaining underpaid and confined to a subsistence activity. As a consequence, with few exceptions, they remain excluded from a wide range of services and measures that would enable them to develop their trade on a larger scale.

As mentioned already, the valuation of work through its quantification is an old claim of feminism, from the pioneering critics of national accounting ignoring unpaid and domestic work to more recent forms of quantification of women's time through time-use surveys. What SE initiatives add is *visibility and value in their daily lives for the women themselves*. The revaluation of social reproduction does not only mean quantification. *It can also take symbolic forms*, and this has been observed in various case studies. In Tamil Nadu's women's Unions, where all activities are manual labour, historically denigrated in a caste society, "the first challenge before the unions was to make the woman self-identify as a worker a sense of

pride and to recognize that it was a positive identity that gave her independence. [...] In defending women's wages, skilling women workers, building their self-confidence so that they may negotiate better in job markets and persuading them to embrace (manual) work-derived identities, these organizations strongly resisted the devaluation of women's productive work and forced all social actors—middle class employers of domestic workers, construction site engineers and contractors and the women workers themselves, to re-evaluate women's work or, at least, not to take for granted women's contribution to economic production" (Chapter 4). In the community care centres in Buenos Aires, a large part of the collective's efforts is precisely to raise the profile of care work and to encourage women's perception that it is "real work". This requires "reviewing the hegemonic perspective that defines nutrition, affective support and education as assistance" instead of work (Chapter 8).

In other words, in addition to quantifying the monetary equivalent of reproductive activities, it is necessary to underscore their social and symbolic value. The reproduction of life is no longer seen as a constraint but as an end in itself. Beyond the case studies of the book, the valuation of reproduction as an end in itself echoes various initiatives of "local feminism" observed in different parts of the world. In these initiatives, the goal is not to accumulate, but to carry out activities that "*reproduce, at the societal level, social bonds, material sustenance and, more generally, a common space of life*" (Degavre, 2011, 82). The action research group *Community Economies*, initiated by Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham,<sup>1</sup> pursues a similar objective. This network of researchers shares a common view that economies have untapped resources and forms of work that are too often hidden, disqualified or rejected by the dominant, monocultural, capital-centric thinking. Echoing the "hermeneutic of emergences" (de Sousa Santos, 2016), *Community Economies* advocate to end up with the standard criteria usually handled to map local "needs", including through participatory tools. By focusing on "gaps" and "failures" (poverty, unemployment, low human capital, low productivity, etc.), they contribute to maintaining the perception of the non-existence of local resources and value. A counter approach consists in identifying the entire set of assets and social relations that make up local economies, and this in turn reveals the plurality of valid economic logics and entanglement of

<sup>1</sup> See <http://communityeconomies.org/>.

forms of interdependencies in the Polanyian sense. In a second stage, this network proposes to identify ways of valuing the assets and social relations that contribute to individual and collective well-being, that redistribute material, social and cultural surplus and that build and maintain the commons (Gibson-Graham, 2005; see also Federici, 2010). Finally, alternative modes of appropriation of work can be achieved through *collective negotiation with employers*, which involves both quantitative and symbolic dimensions, as the examples of the unionization of domestic workers in Kerala (Chapter 7) and of unskilled informal workers in the domestic and construction sector in Tamil Nadu (Chapter 4) illustrate. In SEWA Kerala, domestic work at third parties' homes remains performed individually, but the union offers a common platform providing skill training, placement services and spaces in which women can “learn, understand and share socio-economic and political issues and ideas”. These platforms can be considered as “feminist” spaces insofar as they “allow women to exercise a role that is not strictly reproductive or familial [...] and shared interests of women may result in a “voluntary community” (Chapter 7). Similarly, in women-led Unions in Tamil Nadu, “the aim was for the worker to go beyond her individual relationship with her employer and grasp the principles of collective bargaining” (Chapter 4).

### *Building a Plural Economy, Geared Towards Democracy and Equality*

A fourth type of process related to the potential of SE initiatives to reorganize social reproduction in a fairer and more sustainable way is based on *spaces of plural economy where the four principles of reciprocity, redistribution, householding and the market are present and subjected to the principles of democracy and equality*. Organizing social reproduction through non-domestic and capitalist relationships can be facilitated by *the subsidization by the state of social reproduction costs*, at least partially. In child-care community centres in Buenos Aires, the remuneration of care work is based on a mix of market price, unpaid work and state subsidies, though the latter are still highly insufficient (Chapter 8). In Tamil Nadu, by “forcing the state to subsidize the reproductive costs of their families [education scholarships, health care, social security (old age and disability pensions), marriages and funerals], women-led Unions have challenged patriarchal assumptions in the public and private spheres and exposed the interdependence of productive and reproductive spheres” (Chapter 4). In Brazil, the network of women farmers has grown as a



result of the federal government's technical assistance policy implemented by the feminist NGO SOF, as well as public procurement of family farming's agricultural products. Smaller subsidies at the municipal level, such as the provision of a truck for deliveries, have also made it possible to meet specific needs. At the same time, significant support from civil society has developed, for example through the network of responsible consumer groups in São Paulo. The refinancing of the supporting NGO—SOF—by non-state donors has made it possible to overcome the halt in policies supporting family farming and agroecology under the ultraliberal government of Jair Bolsonaro. Relations of reciprocal exchange are combined with the redistribution of various types of resources. More broadly, all initiatives described in this book devote part of their time and energy to support women in their quest for accessing various forms of governmental redistribution schemes that cover part of their social reproduction costs. At the same time, market relations are continued. Whether they are domestic workers, manual workers, agricultural or handicraft producers, fish-sellers or child-care workers, women trade their work and products on some markets. For women fish-sellers, selling their fish in a marketplace is a source of autonomy and liberation from the traditional forms of caste interdependence that forced them to exchange their fish for other services (Chapter 9). For care-workers, charging for child-care is also a way of making it a “true work” (Chapter 8). But these market relations articulate with other forms of interdependence that allow the women to get a better price (either through collective bargaining or subsidization) and to enjoy various forms of protection, whether by the state or by their own collectives through reciprocal relations. As mentioned in Chapter 2, solidarity is defined in this book as inclusive and egalitarian voluntary relations of interdependence. If social reproduction is to be politicized, it is precisely the subordination of the principles of interdependence to those of democracy and equality that can pave the way.

In summary, our case studies, analysed from the perspective of plural economy and feminist literature, reveal four types of processes through which SE initiatives can offer spaces of resistance to both domestic and capitalist economies and to women's subordination, starting from the precondition of rejecting the separation between production and social reproduction. Firstly, creating spaces of resistance and sustainability by communalizing social reproduction work. Secondly, extending action and reflection on social reproduction to the reproduction of life, both human and non-human, and of broader ecosystems, as this is indispensable for

the overall sustainability of the spaces and processes that are being created. Thirdly, valuing, both monetarily and symbolically, the whole issue of social reproduction. Finally, we argue that, if the initiatives succeed to build social relations that are neither domestic nor capitalist, it is because they articulate the principles of reciprocity, redistribution, householding and the market, and subject them to the principles of democracy and equality, questioning subordination based on gender and other forms of unequal power. These different types of processes are, of course, neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. They are also tightly linked to the building of political awareness, will and capacities for constructing feminist and solidarity-driven social changes.

### POLITICIZING SOCIAL REPRODUCTION: PUBLIC ACTION FROM AUTONOMOUS TO INSTITUTED SPACES

Political thought, just like economics, has been the victim of normative and biased gendered categories, based on restraining the concepts of “public” and “private” that mask the complexity of daily practices and forms of engagement, particularly those of subaltern women. Under the dominant thinking, public debate and political action are considered only possible by separating so-called “private” interests, whether in the domestic or market sphere (Waller & Jennings, 1991), from “public” ones. Feminist historians, social scientists and activists have countered these dichotomies and redeemed various forms of political commitment, showing that it is often women’s domestic responsibilities that lead them to engage in political mobilizations (see, for example, Tilly, 1978), as well as their denial of sexual and reproductive rights or threats and violations at the domestic level. This has led to the feminist statement reaffirmed since the early 1960s that “the personal is political”. Care theorists later claimed that care—including emotional care—is both universal (all of us, whoever we are, need emotional care, recognition, affection and love) and political.

Under this broader conception, where politics is no longer a standalone field, but one that is inseparable from the private sphere and that encompasses multifarious practices, the highly political nature of SE initiatives becomes obvious, including those led by women. In line with previous research, what is observed in the various cases studies can be termed a “cultural reinvention of politics”: these initiatives are not intended to

overthrow the patriarchal nor the capitalist system, but present themselves as “places where the subjects (women and men) construct solutions and blueprints of new relations between men and women, within this territory, without waiting for longer” (Verschuur, 2005, 52).

Politicization happens at multiple levels: from the creation of micro- and local deliberative spaces that are essential to identifying aspirations and priorities and building modes of action, to attempts to get the attention of municipal, regional, national and international decision-making bodies.<sup>2</sup> Far from being distinctly hierarchical, these levels interact with each other. The global is not only shaped by the local but may not take place without the local. Politicization also takes many forms, ranging from public negotiations and dialogue to more radical forms of protest.

### *Local Deliberative Spaces and Lifeworlds*

At the very local level, the cases studies of Vale do Ribeira and women-led Unions in Tamil Nadu underline the embeddedness of women’s initiatives into women’s “lifeworlds” (Chapters 4 and 10). The concept of lifeworld (Habermas, 1997) certainly applies to other case studies. Whatever the contexts, women’s lifeworlds are characterized by the burden of social reproduction tasks, by continuous violence, within their household, their neighbourhood and sometimes with employers. Depending upon local gender norms, women’s lifeworlds are characterized by an intense control over their bodies and sexuality. But women’s lifeworlds are also marked by specific material and emotional relations to trees, plants, insects and animals (Vale do Ribeira, Chapter 10) and to land and water (Chengalpattu, Chapter 5). Women’s lifeworlds may be affected by anxiety but also anger, which may prove instrumental in fuelling the willingness to struggle (Chengalpattu, Chapter 5). They may also be marked by gratitude to committed leaders and empathy towards companions in misfortune, and this proves instrumental in shaping mobilization and solidarity (Chapter 8, Buenos Aires, Chapter 4, Tamil Nadu, Chapter 9, Udupi, Chapter 7, Kerala, Chapter 10, Brazil). Whatever the context, the participation in local and autonomous spaces of discussion in which women share similar lifeworlds allows them to express themselves, share their experiences and sometimes take collective decisions, adapted to local

<sup>2</sup> This echoes our previous work on women’s collectives. See, for example, Guérin (2003), Guerin et al. (2011), Verschuur et al. (2015).

aspirations and constraints. It is through these local spaces that internal differentiations can be, not dismissed, but at least weakened and possibly discussed and debated. It is also through these local spaces that the transformation of values and meaning of work and social reproduction may occur and furthermore, their publicization and transformation into public action. In the monthly *vanithavedi* meetings of SEWA Kerala, women “debate, discuss and resolve issues starting from the household conflict to employer’s behaviour and from sexual exploitation of children to violence against women” (Chapter 7). In Tamil women-led Unions, in area meetings, “people bring up their issues, be it violence or sanitation. Then we [union leaders] explore how this can be dealt with and find strategies to resolve them”. And it is through “the collective deliberation processes [that] women’s identity formation as workers deserving of dignity, respect and social recognition takes place” (Chapter 4). Similarly, female-only associations in Batallas, Bolivia, provide spaces where the women can build “a collective identity (...), reversing the imaginary of individual stories without connection with each other”. These associations constitute both spaces of production and income generation and spaces of sociability which “enable them to express, sometimes for the first time, problems such as domestic violence and the fear of being abandoned by one’s husband and not being able to feed one’s family” (Chapter 6). In community child-care centres in Buenos Aires, the issue of care-work itself “is part of a permanent deliberative exercise. They do not care because they are obliged to do so; they do it as a decision that is planned as a group”. And here too, it is through these deliberative processes that transformations in the self-assessment of the value of their work occur, when women “changed the way they consider themselves from “caring mothers” to “educators or community workers” (Chapter 8). In Chengalpattu, it is the women themselves who requested the NGO to address the issue of land and water depletion. This awareness was already there. But it was through an ongoing dialogue with the NGO that strategies were developed. Apart from specific meetings devoted to debates, evening classes, training sessions and informal discussions were crucial in these local deliberative processes (Chapter 5). In Udupi, the association of women fish-sellers meets monthly and these meeting lead to various outcomes. Managing tensions and conflicts is one, and this not only vis-a-vis men, but also among women themselves, since women fish-sellers have very diverse profile, whether in terms of caste or class. Another outcome is to strengthen “the political consciousness amongst

women of the threats they face from other players” (Chapter 9). In Brazil too, the construction of a network of local women farmers’ groups has meant simultaneously to learn through debate and deliberation to manage differences and daily difficulties and to

### *Instituted Spaces for Public and Political Action*

The very fact that women share and debate collectively issues and challenges that they had been thinking up to now as a private matter is a first and decisive form of politicization (see also Narayan, 1997). These autonomous local spaces then connect with instituted spaces of debate and negotiation at a broader level that allow women to engage in public and political action. Women-led workers’ Unions in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, often in coordination with other Unions, involve in continuous efforts of lobbying to get and institutionalize various forms of social protection (Chapters 4 and 7). In Tamil Nadu, women-led Unions contributed actively to the adoption of the Manual Workers Act (1982) and the formation of the Construction Workers Welfare Board (1994). In Kerala, women obtained in 2011 the creation of a domestic workers’ welfare scheme which ensures pension, social security and minimum wage. Public action also involves negotiation with employers regarding amounts and modalities of wage payment and resistance against evictions of street vendors. In Udupi (Karnataka, India), the women fish-seller association managed to get a “government order” by the District Commissioner to suspend licences to any new fresh fish outlet in the district, allowing them to retain the monopoly on the grounds of the quality of their fresh fish (Chapter 9). In the Vale do Ribeira, Brazil, a network of women farmers, with the help of the feminist NGO SOF, negotiated in a very practical way for the recognition of women’s agricultural work at the municipal level: by asking for the granting of a communal plot of land to enable a group of landless women to cultivate and for the provision of a truck to transport their products (Chapter 10). These requests do not challenge the gender bias of municipal policies head-on, but they are changing them in practice. In Buenos Aires, community care centres are subsidized by the state and are in constant negotiation to increase state support so that women care-workers are paid at a fair price (Chapter 8). In Chengalpattu (Tamil Nadu, India), a network of women agricultural labourers, with the help

of the NGO GUIDE, and in coordination with many other associations and movements, obtained that the extraction of sand is now regulated by the state (Chapter 5).

The valuation and quantification of social reproduction work can be an effective tool of political negotiation. To convince the state of the extent of environmental degradation, the NGO GUIDE got the support of experts to quantify precisely soil erosion and the drying up of the water table. Examples in other fields of social reproduction can be given as additional illustrations. In Senegal, in the early 2000s, women involved in “restaurants de quartier” (neighbourhood restaurants) were fighting to avoid eviction in a context that discourages any sort of street-vending activities. Calculating their monetary contribution to the local economy has been a way to assert their right to exist as economic and political actors (Ndoye, 2014). Putting a price on activities is also relevant for degrading, yet essential tasks such as waste collection. In the city of Pune, India, a union of women waste pickers built its reputation on valuing this type of work, vis-à-vis the workers themselves—members of the lowest social class and caste and fully convinced of the “dirtiness” of their status—and the public authorities. By calculating the monetary equivalent of their work, the union showed how much the municipality was saving on waste treatment (US\$ 330,000 a year with each worker giving the equivalent of \$5/month in free labour). Others have calculated the extent to which the waste pickers contribute to the local economy, by indirect financing of the recycling process and energy gains compared to mechanized collection methods (Narayan & Chikarmane, 2013).

Of course, the politicization of social reproduction is far from being a straightforward process. In the debates on gender equality—like in the sustainable development goals—the need to recognizing, redistributing, reducing and revaluing and the right to care are present. However, the question of how to politicize these claims remains absent and is too often seen as a technical policy issue and not as a political one. By contrast, the case study of community care centres in Buenos Aires highlights two key conditions for such politicization to take place: the collective organization of care work and the connexion with the Argentinian feminist movement, which together lead the members of these centres to recognize themselves as workers, producers of social value and worthy of public recognition and support (Chapter 8). When women don’t recognize themselves as workers and right-holders, this is particularly challenging, as the case study in Batallas, Bolivia, recalls (Chapter 6). In Udupi, women fish-sellers

now recognize themselves as right-holders, but not as workers and this prevents them to claim their right to social protection (Chapter 9).

Strategic alliances with various forms of organizations, institutions, networks and social movements are of course key to sustain the capacities of local initiatives to promote institutional change. But the choices and possibilities of alliance are never given in advance. They depend upon specific historical and political configurations. As a consequence, their understanding must necessarily be historicized and contextualized. The same goes for the range of possible claims. Feminist movements are important allies, as the Argentina and Brazilian, or the Tamil Nadu and Kerala cases show. But the feminist movement is heterogeneous, and hegemonic forms of feminism, even at the national level, often bourgeois, urban-based, are not always in tune with local and popular feminisms or women's movements. In certain political configurations, the alliance with political parties, most often male-dominated, is unavoidable. Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Bolivia are good examples. Refusing such alliances necessarily limits progress, while preserving women's autonomy (Chapter 7, Kerala), or confines women's action to claims of limited ambition (Chapter 9, Udupi).

Alliances with men are also highly strategic. Looking at various forms of women-led collectives and the permanent threat of capture and recuperation by external male-dominated entities, Maxine Molyneux came to the following conclusion: there is a need to promote and secure independent spaces where women can define their own priorities and strategies without external intrusions, and only then linkages with broader struggles can be considered (Molyneux, 2007, 394). This has also been observed in this book, and here too the link to broader struggles takes varied forms, which depend upon both the nature of the claims and the intensity of patriarchal norms. Some initiatives get male support. This support may be explicit, as in the case of women fish vendors in Udupi through the help of the dominant political party in the sub-region (Chapter 9). This support can also be implicit: men do not participate openly, while supporting indirectly women's claims insofar they do not prevent them from taking action, as observed for women agricultural workers fighting against illegal sand extraction in Chengalpattu (Chapter 5). In these two case studies, this tactical alliance is the only way for women to achieve their goal. But this in turn implies that there is no—or limited—questioning of gender inequalities, even though these inequalities are part of the problem they are trying to solve. Women are well aware of this, but

solving part of the problem seems more rational to them than solving nothing at all. Relationships with men can also take the form of dialogue and discussion within spaces of negotiation with authorities and institutions, as observed in other case studies. This is an ongoing challenge. Women are sometimes accepted only as wives or daughters of political leaders (Chapter 4, Tamil Nadu, and Chapter 6, Bolivia).

## CONCLUSIONS: FEMINIST SOLIDARITY ECONOMY THROUGH A CRITICAL AND POSSIBILIST LENS

Appreciating the real subversive and emancipatory value of SE from a feminist perspective requires an adequate framework. Combining a critical and possibilist epistemology allows to highlight the unsuspected potential of SE, without losing sight of social and power relationships. Far from being isolated and ephemeral experiences, SE practices contribute to rethinking and transforming the very notion of economy. This new conceptualization is no longer limited to the production or allocation of resources; it includes social reproduction defined as *all the relationships, institutions and activities necessary for the reproduction and maintenance of life, now and for the future generations*. SE initiatives are concrete actions that may associate decision-making with discussion, mobilization, resistance and, eventually, institutional change—thereby helping to rethink politics and politicizing the issue of social reproduction. As such, they address the long-lasting concerns of some feminist movements, convinced that the patriarchal struggle requires revisiting the very nature of economics and politics (see also Chapter 12), as well as the fundamental heterogeneity of women's aspirations and constraints.

Is it possible to determine the conditions needed for a feminist solidarity economy and the challenges they face? The final chapter with our concluding thoughts will come back to a number of common trends. At this stage, it is worth mentioning very broad conditions. Some women, especially the most marginalized, can and want to (re)appropriate their own destiny and decide by themselves their priorities and forms of action; this is an essential condition, one which implies accepting the *indivisibility of action and deliberation*. In line with our epistemological posture, another aspect is worth mentioning: considering that there is a radical discontinuity between emancipatory alternatives and oppressive practices and sources of exploitation is illusory. Many women are experimenting new ways of thinking and doing, while contributing to broader social



dynamics they do not always control. In this process, paths of resistance to both domestic and capitalist economies are emerging, which are in fact concrete illustrations of a number of ancient feminist claims: discarding the division between “production” and “reproduction”, alleviating the unequal sexual division of labour, moving towards the communalization of social reproduction while continuing the pressure to the state to fulfil its responsibilities, claiming for the valuation of women’s work, both monetarily and symbolically, and an extension to a broader vision of life, both human and non-human. If the initiatives succeed to create social relations that are neither domestic nor capitalist, it is because they articulate the principles of reciprocity, redistribution, householding and the market, and subject them to the principles of democracy and equality, contesting subaltern women’s subordination.

These plural configurations are indeed unstable, first and foremost because they are often rooted in structural asymmetries that reflect and crystallize affiliations of gender but also class, race, caste, location, life cycle, etc., and this at various scales. Due to the continuous adaptation to contexts that are both unique and changing, the forms and motivations for struggle are a succession of steps forward and backward, in which the outcome is often unpredictable, as observed in other forms of women’s mobilization (Kabeer et al., 2013). Balancing various forms of economic interdependency is an ongoing process that never ends. This may give a feeling of incompleteness and “permanent experimentation” (Hersent, 2014) or “structural indeterminacy” (Gibson-Graham, 2014). But these features are the very conditions of existence of these initiatives.

The following chapters of this book, based on in-depth empirical investigations of seven initiatives from various parts of India and Latin America, describe and analyse the trajectory of these initiatives, their achievements and the obstacles they face. They show the difficult paths for change, in a context of global financial capitalism and deep crises of social reproduction. They show that while resisting the growing expansion of capitalism and the pervasive place of domestic economies, rethinking and reorganizing social reproduction is a perilous, fragile and ambivalent exercise. But they also show that new imaginaries, new social relations, new forms of organizations and new institutions are *possible*.

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