INTRODUCTION: DIGNITY AND ECONOMIC SURVIVAL: WOMEN IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN AND THE WORK OF HELEN I. SAFA
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INTRODUCTION:
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CARIBBEAN AND THE WORK OF HELEN I. SAFA

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Notions of dignity underpin the ways women, men and children deal and maneuver through their inequitable and often oppressive social situations in the Caribbean and Latin America. How they manage to garner food, shelter and clothing, as well as educate themselves, and work on behalf of others around them are central themes of Helen I. Safa’s career and are echoed by scholars whose work appears here. There is nothing like working towards a common goal as members of a network of scholars committed to economic justice, human rights and gender equality. Further, the contributors to this issue were drawn to this project by their relationship to their mutual mentor and or life-long friend Helen I. Safa. Like the workers, miners, community leaders, and peasant and poor women, men and children they studied, this assembly of scholars both women and men, differing in age, race and national origin, understand the imperatives of collective action and collective consciousness. These necessary elements bring about social change in social movements, and are critical analytic tools for considering the lives of people represented in scholarly production.

The ideologies of social change expressed here are merged with feminism—a woman-centered/gender-centered view that actively seeks justice, human rights and gender equality. This perspective is exemplified in Safa’s career as a scholar, leader, mentor and “networker” par excellence. Safa serves as the lynchpin, or resource, for this network as the members who are represented illustrate.

Some of the articles in this special issue are devoted to Safa as a person and as an expert in the area of women, work, and family studies. Other contributions acknowledge Safa’s expertise in an indirect fashion. Nonetheless, there is a distinctive emphasis on the role that feminist social science/anthropology and political economy plays when gender relations are used as explanatory mechanisms for women’s inequality in culture and society in the region.

This Introduction provides a map by which to navigate the multiple layers of gender relations, social inequality, economic survival and women’s activism in both Safa’s scholarship and in her scholarly life more
generally. Therefore, one goal is to provide something of the historical context within which Safa’s scholarship emerged. Another is to take this context to the particular, illustrating connections on both intellectual and personal levels. Through their membership in a network, individuals find support and perform as sounding boards for each other’s own work. Safa has maintained crucial intellectual, political, and personal ties throughout her career and continues to develop other relationships across succeeding generations of researchers. The overwhelming mutual respect that links the contributors of this issue is what academic camaraderie is all about.

Mexico City, Before and Afterwards

For most Latin American and Caribbean women scholars, planners, and activists, the real momentum for change was recharged, or started in the first place, after the 1975 International Women’s Year (IWY) conference held in Mexico City. True, there had been other meetings of women from around the globe and across the hemisphere where they voiced their political views. At the 1947 Primer Congreso Interamericano de Mujeres convened in Guatemala City, women demanded that post-war investment should finance health, education, social services and the infrastructure and not to arm the military. However, none of those earlier meetings turned up the volume of women’s activism, as did the activities and foment surrounding the IWY. Furthermore, the Mexico City conference fueled the political power of the decade—the United Nations’ Decade for women (1975-85)—that gave international exposure and legitimacy to women’s issues and agenda. Women workers, researchers, planners, activists, and intellectuals across the Americas mobilized against gender inequality and for social and economic change, human rights and justice. What propelled this outpouring of scholarship, research, national planning and the like, were the possibilities that feminism offered as a body of personal and political theory to address social and economic inequality.

Under the auspices of the UN, gender inequities found across the globe were documented, regardless if a nation was rich or poor, advanced industrialized, neo-colonial or destitute. It would be up to committed women and their male colleagues, from within the region and their allies, to chart the next course of action. There were major revisions of the socio-economic history of the Americas to contend with, including the role that women played in these events (Jelin 1990; Navarro 1979; Stoner 1989). Also, there were models of development to question, and how a gender perspective illuminated other sites of social inequality (Bergmann, et al. 1990; Nash 1985; Nash and Safa 1976, 1985; Saffioti 1978).
Some women’s political activity in Latin America and the Caribbean was already in process, and thrived on the inspiration from the Decade (Acosta-Belén 1994). From their own class or political position in society, women as collective bodies challenged the status quo and demanded their rights as citizens using a variety of tactics. Christian Based Communities, practicing the Theology of Liberation that equated poverty with sin, intensified the fervor of women’s political grassroots action throughout the region (Gill 1994; Stephen 1994). For example, the CO-MADRES’s (the Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Disappeared and Assassinated of El Salvador, “Monseñor Romero”) acts of bravery, commitment, and philosophy of justice peeled away the shroud of silence surrounding the oppression occurring in El Salvador in the 1970s. Without the impetus of the UN Decade, CO-MADRES could not have gathered the national and international attention and support that it garnered so well into the 1980s. The social and political experiments of the 1970s in the Caribbean drew on women’s political work. Underscoring Grenada’s experience under the People’s Revolutionary Government, and the first two Michael Manley administrations in Jamaica, were progressive women’s groups. Women’s issues and concerns were important elements of state processes of social transformation. Basically, the Decade made it very difficult for the majority of the hemisphere’s governments and international agency bodies to “add women and stir” to their policies and planning.

Part of the overall drive to put Latin American and Caribbean women’s thought and activity onto the page of the economic planners, government officials, historians, and other transmitters of information came from committed scholars, teachers, and activists from the region and their allied colleagues from the United States, Canada, and Europe. Benefitting from and creating new feminist methods, theories, and politics in their work, these researchers moved beyond the tendencies associated with much of the literature of the day (Basu 1995:1). Forgiving their own way, these women scholars had to dismantle much of the damage done in the name of “global sisterhood.”

The global sisterhood perspective, cloaked in a classist and racist maternalism of its own making, was very reminiscent of similar issues faced by the second wave of the U.S. women’s movement itself (Evans 1979), and the heavy-handedness of U.S.-sponsored international aid and development practices (see Deere, et al. 1990). A list of the damaging, broad characteristics of the global sisterhood literature includes: ignoring women’s movements in the postcolonial world; considering these activities as products of modernization or development; assuming a sameness in the forms of women’s oppression and women’s movements cross-nationally. The long and short of these tendencies meant that the
majority of these studies on women from “the Third World,” before and even after Mexico City, ignored the activities and words of women of the South as agents and as actors working on their own behalf. Whether they were beneficiaries or victims of “development,” women were silenced in word, in deed, and definitely on the page. For instance, “feminism” as social and political acts became attractive to the upwardly-mobile and the middle classes of Latin America and the Caribbean. However, by associating women’s movements led by the upper classes with increasing levels of industrialization, urbanization, the expansion of education, and increased employment opportunities, the larger picture shifted. In this fashion, the telling of the story of CO-MADRES would focus on its leaders, who it would be assumed were products of the middle class. In reality, it was a group of grassroots women workers who were the guiding forces of the organization (Stephen 1994). The global sisterhood position ignored the role of grassroots women in their own struggle for human rights, gender equality, citizenship and economic transformation. Further, by homogenizing women’s lives and experiences under the banner of global sisterhood another dimension to the silencing and ignoring tendencies occurred. For example, if there were any differences noted among the women under study, then those who were poor and non-white usually bore “the disproportionate burden of difference” (Alexander and Mohanty 1997:xviii).

The inability of the global sisterhood approach to encompass all was at the heart of disagreements that took place in Mexico City. Each group had its own agenda, and dialogue was shortchanged by those incapable of really engaging in meaningful conversation and exchange. What global sisterhood proponents failed to recognize was the following: First, each society was a product of its own history based on the specific social construction of gender, the division of labor within and outside of the domestic scene, and other aspects of social organization, such as class, “race,” ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. Second, feminisms, or women-centered ideologies, had to deal within that framework, as well as those that came with the expansion of a worldwide economic system—capitalism.

For those who witnessed the verbal battles across the divisions of class, “race,” ethnicity, religion, language, urban, rural, and other differences in 1975 during the Mexico City meetings, they noted a sense of similarity to those discussions. Researchers on any social movement, labor organizing, community or neighborhood group, recognized the similar sources of confusion and dissension, all pertaining to unequal access to resources and social hierarchy. Some important lessons were to be learned, and the progressive social scientists familiar with class, “race,” and ethnic consciousness now had to incorporate gender into
the analysis for this social transformation to occur. In addition, the overlapping, multilayered circumstances had to be contextualized by social-economics framed by a world economy—now known as globalization. This is the contribution of feminist anthropology that came into play in advancing the study of Latin American and Caribbean women.

**Contributions to Feminist Anthropology**

What feminist anthropologists brought to the understanding of the world economics was predicated on their sagacity of the gendered division of labor, and how global accumulation profited unequally from the workings of women and men (see Safa and Nash 1976). Not quite neat and tidy, the world economic system had its particularities and histories in specific locations. Applying a political economic framework to their ethnographic studies (see Nash 1981; Roseberry 1988), feminist anthropologists were able to illustrate how the gendered division of labor in and outside of the household elucidated the impact of socioeconomic change in specific localities, linking the national to the global.

Earlier, economist Ester Boserup (1970) argued for analyzing women’s role in production in society by examining the economy’s reliance on that labor for subsistence and export. If women, whose production was essential for the national welfare, occupied a secondary position in production, then something other than the local culture was working against them. For the most part, what was working against women was not their own culture, but that of the colonial model that mirrored the sexual division of labor promoted by capitalism. In the later part of the 1960s and early 1970s, dependency (Frank 1967) and world-systems theories (Wallerstein 1974) were critical approaches to understanding economic inequities faced by the global South. Over the next ten years, those models were thoroughly examined, critiqued, and adapted, particularly through a gendered lens.

Feminist anthropologists, too many to cite here, working in the Caribbean and Latin America centered their work on the organization of domestic and public sphere labor under pre-Columbian, colonial, and neo-colonial and newly-independent nation state conditions and examined those processes in terms of gender, ethnic, and class differences. As June Nash argued (1981), historically there had been sites of resistance as well as the contradictions of internal hierarchies to contend with in cultures and societies in the region that did not follow the dependency/world capitalist system approaches. The suspicion of unitary models had a variety of sources, but for anthropologists engaged in the study of women, questionable universals were fresh on their minds. In the rise of a feminist anthropology, theories concerning the universal
subordination of women were hotly debated (see Ortner 1974). Eleanor Burke Leacock (1981) argued that there are or have been truly egalitarian societies. She viewed analytical constructs of public/private and nature/culture, and the dominance of males as universal to be distortions of reality and harmful politically (see Sutton and Lee 1993). For Leacock, the subordination of women was a product of history and not a transhistorical, universal condition. Leacock’s colleagues, engaged in research in Latin America and the Caribbean, joined in on the discussion about the origins of women’s oppression. Timing and the intensity of female inequality became an issue. Did the rise in gender inequality come before or after the rise of capitalism? What about pre-contact indigenous cultures? How about the gendered structure of plantation America, the hacienda, or encomienda systems of production? After all, these historical systems shaped contemporary society, and were still in place in most areas of the hemisphere. When all was said and done, the origins question found meaning in the gendered history of specific locations, and the cultures that developed following 1492. Whether the society was pre-contact and colonial Inca (Silverblatt 1987), peasants from the Andes (Babb 1989), working-class laborers on the Mexico-U.S. border (Fernández-Kelly 1983), or middle-class Caribbean union leaders (Bolles 1996a), the underlying conditions were predicated by a people’s cultural history, the environment, unequal access to resources, and social hierarchy that rested on the sexual division of labor. Across the hemisphere, the varying situations of women in culture and society, in the past and the present could not pass the test for universality. If anything, the common thread was the primary role the region played in developing the world economic system, and how women were essential to the success of this enterprise. The question then concerned, in what ways did women contribute to the world economic system, and how did this impact on the gendered division of labor, in and outside of the home? Furthermore, the dependency/world system models were not equipped to explain the new international division of labor. Globalization erased boundaries of core, periphery, and semiperiphery as transnational firms move production to sites containing reserves of cheap, available labor, with governments willing to turn a blind eye to poor working conditions or restrict trade unions from organizing workers. Under this latest phase of capitalism, labor uses the latest technology in production in the core as well as in the periphery and semiperiphery (Fernández-Kelly 1983), and relocates transnational migrants (Deere, et al. 1990; Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994) to the core, or in other areas of the so-called periphery. Changes in production impact employment practices of women and men, that in turns affects households and gender relations.
Latin American and Caribbean Women and the Global Economy

By the 1980s, feminist anthropologists working in Latin America and the Caribbean turned to developing the models for understanding the material realities, social institutions and cultural ideologies that shape women’s incorporation into the new global arena (Gunewardena and Kingsolver 2007). Constructs of power and the household division of labor, understanding the role of women in both domestic and remunerative work, were and continue to be major issues. From an early start in the 1970s, this direction of research was imperative considering the changes in agricultural production and the rise of industrial employment opportunities in Latin America and the Caribbean. Economist Lourdes Benería (1981) challenged standard measurements of women’s work, and called for evaluating both women’s household production and labor force participation in terms of economic activity. By using the term “making a living” versus the standard “earning a living,” women with differing needs and ways of laboring for their livelihoods could be considered as economic agents.

By the end of the 1970s, women were becoming the fastest growing group of industrial workers. Why was this the case? The early literature on this issue looked at the international division of labor, the incorporation of women into these enterprises, and spoke of the untapped reservoir of women’s cheap, malleable, and controllable labor (see Nash and Fernández-Kelly 1983). Further, it is not only a question of how women’s wages fit into the household division of labor but also to understand this aspect of economic change in the context of women’s domestic labor. Household strategies based on the division of labor involved how people maneuver and manage things that are both within and outside their control. How did industrial work in developing countries in free trade zones (FTZs), export processing zones (EPZs), and the off-shore manufacturing enclaves, impact on women’s lives as mothers, wives, partners, and workers?

Nash and Fernández-Kelly (1983) and their contributors argue that transnational corporate capital transformed the worldwide workforce causing substantial changes of families and communities. Attracted to the developing world such as Latin America and the Caribbean, corporations located there and enjoyed low-cost labor, tax exemptions, and lax production restrictions. In Fernández-Kelly’s (1983) classic study of maquiladoras, subsidiaries of multinationals on the U.S.-Mexico border, she documents the sex segregation of the labor force thereby exacerbating male unemployment and underemployment. In addition, work in FTZs and EPZs provides no job security, no possibilities of advancement, and this work frequently expose workers to toxins and other risks.
to their health. In the following decades, research on these same issues records similar findings in the Caribbean (see, for example, Bolles 1983, 1996b; Kelly 1987; Deere, et al. 1990; Pérez-Herranz 1996; del Alba Acevedo 1995; Ríos 1995; Freeman 1998, 2000; Yelvington 1995). Addressing these changes, Edna Acosta-Belén and Christine Bose (1995:25) also note that FTZ and EPZ multinationals frequently generate economic havoc by moving their operations to a new port with more advantageous incentives when their “industrial peace” is threatened by labor activism or when they seek increased profit margins. Women, men and children’s welfare are therefore kept in suspense under these varying economic circumstances. Likewise, the Latin American and Caribbean national economies are also kept in flux and dependent to the movements of global capital in terms of multinationals and trade.

Over the course of two decades (1970s and 1980s), Latin America and the Caribbean faced economic crisis conditions that are often compared to those of the Great Depression (see Acosta-Belén 1994). Turning to International Monetary Fund (IMF) or other international lending agencies became the way nations could correct the weaknesses and deficiencies in their economies. Jamaica’s negotiations with the IMF in 1977 is just one example of how the national debt turned into a redesigning of the structure of the economy based on IMF directives. The dictates of structural adjustment policies (SAPs), which in 1977 did not have an acronym, were keenly felt by poor and working class women in three ways. They produced 1) a sharp fall in wages and rising female unemployment; 2) an unequal burden which the rising cost of living imposes on women; and 3) reductions in public spending for services on which women rely. On the whole, the SAPs have impacted women, children, and men by drastically reducing their ability to acquire the basics of human subsistence (food, shelter and clothing) as well as such social welfare services as health care, education, sanitation, and fuel subsidies (Bolles 1996b:107). The reason for this reduction is the design of the policies themselves: they specifically target the most costly elements in national expenditures, reduce the money set aside for those elements, and redirect the funds to other parts of the economy. Thus, when they cut into social services especially, SAPs home in on women’s labor, both in and outside of the home. By the mid 1980s, the term SAPs was part of the local vernacular throughout the region.

Structural adjustment policies were not the only external directives that transformed the many of the economies of the Caribbean. Major investments from the United States were made through the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), which provided a virtual carte blanche for large scale domiciling of U.S. assembly plants in region (see Safa 1995). As Yelvington (1995:79) points out, the majority of domestic manufactured
products were excluded from the CBI list. Therefore, there was little beneficial spread effects felt in host countries beyond the barbed-wire fences that encircle the zones.

Women industrial workers throughout the Caribbean find themselves managing their lives in a way that maintains their respectability while showcasing their ingenuity and their ability to craft out a self-beneficial space for themselves and those who depend on them as mothers, wives, partners, friends and kin. Carla Freeman, in her study of “pink collar” women workers in a multinational subsidiary located in Barbados, notes “there is a need to look at how global workers and local cultures accommodate the demands of multinational capital, but also how, in small as well as large ways, they force foreign companies to attend to their own cultural practices and desires” (2000:3).

Aspects of Safa’s Oeuvre

Since social relations of production are based on the variances of globalization as capital seeks sources of cheap labor, questions arise about women’s labor and how it counts in this process of accumulation. Under what circumstances do women work outside of the home, who controls family finances, how is the family organized, and what mitigating circumstances affect how women and men access wage labor? How do individuals, as members of families, decide on who migrates and to what location? Further, what role do the remittances sent back home play in the survival of those families and their success in this globalized economy?

Safa’s The Myth of the Male Breadwinner (1995; Spanish translation 1998a) is based on over a decade of research in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. It looks at how increases in women’s employment in manufacturing in those three countries impacted the respective national economies and the structure of domestic units. In Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, employment in FTZs and EPZs had a dramatic impact on women’s roles in and out of the home. Definitions of women’s worth as a mother, wife, and worker came into play in cultures where this perspective was new. Men saw their contribution to the family economy erode as traditional male jobs were made redundant, and new sources of employment were targeted at women. Framing the change in women’s labor force participation was the economic crisis in the Dominican Republic, the downturn in the U.S. economy played out in Puerto Rico, and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc in Cuba. Safa organized feminist researchers in all three islands who then used the data they collected in their own plans of action.

Like the formation of her own networks with her colleagues, Safa’s
anthropological vision is a dynamic one that emphasizes the complex interactions and multi-level linkages that determine behavioral outcomes. In her work, there is an overarching concern with explaining socio-economic inequality and its cultural causes and consequences. She concentrates on several pieces of a vast puzzle. She delineates and describes the process of proletarianization, working forward and backward, as it were, in terms of causality. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the proletarianization process is the result of dependent economic and political relationships with North American and European and, increasingly, Asian capital. These links are entailed in colonial, post-colonial, and neo-colonial political relationships. So, Safa is interested in the local forms of the state as an object of anthropological investigation as well as the world-system as a whole, anticipating by decades the recent anthropological interest in globalization. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the proletarianization process more often than not entails an urbanization process involving rural-to-urban movement. As a consequence, Safa developed a major interest in the study of migration as another manifestation of movement within the world-system. But she displays an awareness that these processes do not affect all members of a society equally, nor do they occur in a cultural vacuum. Safa therefore trains her feminist vision on the situation of those likely to be most adversely affected by these congealed processes: women and their children. What are the consequences for women of the industrialization by invitation/import substitution programs, such as Puerto Rico’s “Operation Bootstrap?” How do women’s life situations change with respect to their place in the life cycle? What impact does women’s employment (and men’s unemployment) have on the household division of labor? To what extent is the Latin American/Hispanic Caribbean so-called casa/calle (house/street) distinction adequate for describing the lot of contemporary women in these societies? In what ways is patriarchy challenged and in what ways is it reinforced by these processes? These are some of the questions she seeks to answer with her investigations that throw the reader a question back: What effect do these developments have on the political consciousness of the poor, and especially of women? This is the kind of question that inevitably serves as a call to action manifesting itself in the nexus of academic scholarship and activism. And these are not the mere “research interests” that might appear on an academic’s résumé, but a career-long integrated research program and political praxis. While the articles in this collection discuss certain aspects of her work in depth, we feel it is apposite here to lay out some further aspects of Safa’s oeuvre in summary fashion.

The concerns specified above ramify outward from her first major publication, *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico* (1974; Spanish translation
1980a). In that work, Safa on the very first page seeks to refute the promoters of the Puerto Rican success story that depend upon society-wide, macro-economic indicators for their arguments:

Barriada Tokio, a shantytown in Hato Rey, Puerto Rico, 1971.
Photo by James Weber.
Here, however, I have attempted to describe the impact of these changes on a particular segment of Puerto Rican society—on the migrants who left the rural area in the early 1940s and settled in squalid shantytowns to form the core of an urban, industrial labor force. In many respects, the lives of these families reflect the transformations that have taken place in Puerto Rican society since the 1940s. (1974:1)

With the boom in San Juan’s population, starting in the depression of the 1930s and the stagnation of agriculture, and later fueled by the industrialization program-driven demand for labor, spurring the concomitant population drain from the rural areas and neglect of agriculture, shantytowns sprung up in the island. By the end of the 1960s, there were more than 400 shantytowns on the island, with nearly 80,000 dwelling units. In the San Juan area, there were a number along the Martín Peña Channel. These neighborhoods of clapboard houses situated on reclaimed mangrove swampland, were physically, socially, and, to an extent, culturally set apart from the business and residential districts of the capital. Often without electricity, running water, or sewage facilities, they were connected by wooden plank sidewalks. And it is to these shantytowns where Safa’s fieldwork took her starting in 1959-60 with her study of “Los Peloteros.” As she points out, shantytowns in Puerto Rico are in many ways like the squatter settlements found all over Latin America. The main difference being that the Latin American ones show improvements over time, often evolving into stable working-class neighborhoods while many Puerto Rican ones did not get the chance as they have been demolished as part of urban renewal schemes. Indeed, Los Peloteros was cleared and all the families dispersed by 1962. Safa clearly established rapport with a number of families as she was able a decade later to re-establish contact and conduct a number of interviews with all the families with whom she was close. And five decades later she is still in contact with many of them.

The Urban Poor animated Safa’s research agenda. Her subsequent writings elaborate and extend upon the myriad theoretical possibilities brought out in her ethnography and primary data collection. She goes on to connect migration and urbanization to capitalist encroachment in the Third World with a political economy perspective (Safa 1982). For Safa, a political economy of urbanization in the Third World means focusing on the dependent nature of capitalist development in the Third World and the emphasis on the external determining economic and political forces, understanding historical processes and the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist modes of production. It means, further, taking into consideration the class structure of Third World cities and how the informal sector—populated by migrants in many cases—articulates with and subsidizes the modern formal sector by providing cheap goods and
services, including the sale of labor, and it also involves scrutiny of the role of the state in promoting the interests of the capitalist class and the formal manufacturing and financial sectors through such means as tax policy, the provision of infrastructure, and access to credit and foreign exchange.

While Safa herself does not engage in historical analysis from primary documents the way many anthropologists now do, she is theoretically astute enough to see rural to urban migration, and the articulation of the formal and informal sectors, in developmental and comparative perspective. So the way the rural subsistence sector in Africa subsidizes the urban labor force contrasts significantly with the Latin American experience. This is due to the existence of a viable rural subsistence sector in Africa whereas in Latin America capitalist penetration in the rural areas since the Spanish conquest and the development of haciendas to produce for an export market has meant a developed agricultural sector and the attendant effects of land shortage and fragmentation, and proletarianization, leading to rural flight. Historically, capitalist expansion to the hinterlands has caused the disintegration of the rural subsistence sector and the rise in the levels of urbanization. As such, an increasing dependence on the urban informal economy obtains not only to underwrite the urban formal sector and elite but, also, to provide what the now-diminished rural subsistence sector cannot now provide.

Here is where Safa again goes beyond her earlier studies. The Third World’s urban informal sector consists not only of sellers of cañita and
the chiriperos of Los Peloteros but productive (but not protected) workers engaged in manufacture for export and the export trade. Given the state’s need to service foreign debt and earn foreign exchange, policies that favor export manufacturing are promulgated and put into place. As Safa argues for the case of Latin America (Safa 1986), much of this occurs in the informal sector and receives governmental support as well as support from the international aid community. Informal manufacturing is “competitive” because it relies on vulnerable segments of the population, like women and children, for unpaid labor and support services, and because it exists outside the formal labor market with its guarantees of minimum wages, working conditions, and health and retirement benefits. It therefore undermines the gains made by organized labor and represents a serious threat to the unions themselves. It earns praises from the international aid community for being “entrepreneurial” and is often held up as a model for development prescriptions. But, again, Safa emphasizes when and where, and to what extent, this has occurred and does occur is historically and cross-culturally variable.

Safa’s anthropological program demands not only ethnographies of the downtrodden, but it also mandates “studying up” and “multi-site” ethnographies—and did so before similar calls for such approaches by postmodernist anthropologist George E. Marcus (see, e.g., Marcus 1983, 1995, Marcus with Hall 1992). The First World firm that most interests Safa because of its preference for female labor is what she calls a “run-away shop” (1981). These are the business establishments headquartered in the developed world that search the globe for cheap labor. They take advantage of vulnerable and desperate sectors of the labor force and of Third World states’ industrialization-by-invitation policies that provide a number of incentives such as tax breaks and the establishment of FTZs and EPZs. And these firms are able to—and often do—pick and move their centers of manufacturing once these incentives expire. Thus, there is an intense global competition occurring for Third World women’s cheap labor. Safa’s interest in the effects of this process in Latin America and the Caribbean was sparked by her study of a U.S. garment factory (Safa 1987a). It was part of a comparative study in collaboration with her Brazilian colleague Heleieth I.B. Saffioti. It made her realize that this New Jersey factory was part of the international division of labor, and that jobs in the garment industry were in the forefront of a process of relocating manufacturing operations where labor was cheaper. In fact, many garment factories relocated to Puerto Rico, and this reconnected Safa with research on the island.

There is a reflexive element to Safa’s anthropology. She is aware of the effects of social science discourse on its “subjects.” For example, Safa does not stigmatize the residents of Los Peloteros. She documents
their networks of inter-household cooperation from the sharing of tools to cooperative labor projects to repair homes. She quotes one Pelotereña passing by with a plate of rice and beans: “Nadie aquí pasa hambre” (“No one here goes hungry”) (1974:18). She shows that relatives are particularly important to the women she studies, and they are especially close to their female relatives. In *The Urban Poor*, she documents the operation of *compadrazgo*, godparenthood, and how this institution of ritual kinship becomes a vehicle for mutual aid among its other functions. She is anxious to refute Oscar Lewis’s depictions of the Puerto Rican poor (and by extension, the poor elsewhere) in *La Vida* (Lewis 1966):

> Despite their low standard of living and their total dependence on the urban economy, Pelotereños are remarkably optimistic and believe strongly in the value of work, thrift, and individual initiative. Even the poorest families aspire toward a better future for themselves and their children. We found little of the hopelessness and apathy that Lewis claims characterized families in the culture of poverty. (1974:33; see, also, Safa 1970; Leacock 1971)

At the same time, she is convinced of the utility of social science investigations as part of a personal and political struggle. In this light she is particularly interested in forms of political consciousness—class consciousness on the part of the subordinate classes, gender consciousness on the part of women (see Safa 1975a, 1980b)—and the obstacles to the attainment of an awareness of oppression, the identification of the oppressing forces such as dependent capitalism and neo-colonialism and dependency, and prescriptions for remedial political action. In *The Urban Poor*, for example, she shows how Pelotereños refer to themselves as “los pobres,” the poor, and recognize similarities amongst themselves, their idea of class consciousness does not extend beyond the boundary of the community and they see possibilities for upward mobility not in terms of class solidarity but in individualistic or family-centered terms (1974:25-26). Puerto Rico’s unions are ineffective in this regard because of their involvement with the political parties over the statehood issue, and because of their personalistic, hierarchical relations with the working class. Elsewhere (Safa 1975a, 1980b, 1995), she argues that younger as opposed to older women are the most limited in their class and gender consciousness. This she attributes to their vulnerable status in the labor force and within the household. It is no accident, she points out, that this is precisely the segment of the labor force targeted for recruitment by new industries. For Safa, the role of the politically-committed social scientist is not only to provide the powerless with the information necessary to come to such an awareness, but also, more positively perhaps, to act in the roles of mediator and advocate on their behalf in the centers of power (see Deere, et al. 1990).
At the very end of *The Urban Poor*, she argues strongly that **economic development alone will not eradicate poverty and social inequality.** The persistence of poverty in the most developed nations of the world, including the United States, should have long since destroyed that myth; yet it continues to be applied to developing nations with the same blind faith. It is not recognized that in a class-stratified, capitalistic, colonial society, like Puerto Rico, the benefits of modernization accrue mainly to the elite who already own property and other economic interests. Development by itself does not destroy their differential access to sources of power, prestige, and wealth. This can be accomplished only by a redistribution of the resources of the society.

She decries the lack on the part of the working class of “a sense of oppression, an identification of the elite as the source of oppression, and a belief that oppression can be overcome by collective action and class solidarity. On the contrary, the Puerto Rican poor have been taught to accept the guidance of the elite, both the native bourgeoisie and the American colonial power, whose interests are clearly based on the maintenance of the status quo.” And she closes with criticisms of reformist and halfway solutions. While “Independence is not enough,” Only independence will free Puerto Rico from the colonial, capitalistic framework which severely limits any possibility of radical social change. Thus, independence must be linked to a socialist program which aims at ending the present system of inequality in Puerto Rico through a redistribution of wealth and power in the society. Such a program, which offers tangible benefits to the poor, may eventually win their support. (Safa 1974:109, 110, emphasis in original)

The themes discussed above find their fullest expression in a book that represents a capstone to her career, *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner* (1995). This is a comparative and ambitious investigation of women’s employment and state policies in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba based upon research undertaken in the 1980s. For Safa, these represent the most interesting of comparisons: all three Caribbean territories share a legacy of Spanish colonization, the plantation complex, and, later, U.S. hegemony. Since 1960 they all have transformed from an agrarian to an urban industrial economy. And in all three societies, albeit for different reasons, women workers are entering the workforce more and more—as part of a general trend throughout Latin America and the Caribbean—lessening their dependency upon men by becoming wage-earning mainstays of the household income, and even showing evidence of an increasing awareness of their need to work to support themselves and their children—thus giving lie to the idea of the male breadwinner. But differences remain profound at the state level. Puerto Rico represents a neo-colonial status, the Dominican Republic a politically...
In Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, women’s increased labor force participation is due to the demand for female labor on the part of the multinational firms located there and state policies favoring such developments. In Cuba, women’s increased labor force participation, by contrast, is in response to wage and consumer policies instituted by the Cuban state. In Cuba, the increasing employment of women has led to transformations in gender relations within the household, but there, unlike in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, women are not replacing men as the household’s principal breadwinner.

In *The Myth*, Safa describes and analyzes the effects of paid industrial employment on women’s lives in these three territories. Although based upon household surveys and in-depth interviews, some conducted by research assistants, Safa employs a kind of crisp, straightforward writing, the subject matter of which is made even more evocative because we hear the women’s voices. She reveals the myriad hardships and the small victories of the women workers, and their quotidian struggles. She starts two chapters of *The Myth* with the following:

 juana santana works in the free trade zone of la romana in the Dominican Republic and sustains her family of three children on her weekly salary of DR$57 (in 1986 about U.S.$20), which must cover household costs including food, rent, the baby-sitter, and her own expenses such as transportation and lunch. Her husband earns some money driving a taxi (público) owned by his family, but like many men living with the women workers in the free trade zones, he does not have a stable job. With three children to support, her husband's unstable income, and the high cost of living, Juana knows she has to continue working. She notes: “Anyway, I have to work, either in the zone or in a private home [as a domestic], anyway, because I, I cannot be dependent on my husband. Because what he earns is not enough, to help my family and to help me here at home.” (Safa 1995:1)

What Safa elicits from these women is the complex nature of their lives, as they need to take on these jobs due to financial circumstances of their household incomes. Moreover, they must find ways to keep these jobs, such as finding reliable transportation to and from work because this source of income is worth the effort. You suffer if you do not have transport, but you suffer more if you do not have this income.

When I interviewed Myrna in 1986, she had been working for the same garment firm for 30 years. She began working at age 15, sewing gloves at home in the old needlework industry. Myrna originally made $10 a week working in the original plant in Mayagüez, which has since shut
down, and she now commutes to work in a branch plant in a nearby town. She complains of the commute: “Yo me tengo que levantar a las cinco de la mañana, para ya a las seis menos cuarto ir donde la muchacha que me lleva, entonces para Rincón. Y no tengo carro, yo mientras pueda para Rincón no voy. Yo trabajé allá, trabajé allá dos años y sufri mucho, porque usted sabe que el que no tiene carro, que no tiene para moverse, sufre.” (I have to get up at five in the morning, in order to leave at a quarter to six for the girl who takes me to Rincón. I don’t have a car, as long as I can I won’t go to Rincón. I worked there, worked there for two years, and suffered a lot, because you know that if you don’t have a car, if you have no way to move, you suffer.) Rincón is the branch plant located furthest away from Mayagüez. (Safa 1995:59)

Safa asks “Does wage labor merely exploit women as a source of cheap labor and add to the burden of their domestic chores? Or does wage labor give women greater autonomy and raise their consciousness regarding gender subordination?” (1995:37). In doing so, Safa addresses directly a main concern of feminist anthropology: She is interested in the relations between patriarchy, defined as male control over female labor and sexuality, and capitalism. She takes a somewhat conventional approach by holding that “patriarchy predates capitalism,” but maintains that patriarchy “is a dynamic concept that differs historically and cross-culturally” (1995:38). Being careful to distinguish between patriarchy based in kinship relations, which involves the reciprocity of male protection traded for women’s obedience, and patriarchy in its other forms that requires little or no reciprocity, Safa argues that the various levels of women’s subordination—in the family, at the workplace, in state policies—are linked but should be kept analytically separate. She builds up the argument that, with the advent of industrial capitalism, the primary locus of patriarchy has shifted from the private to the public, from the household and kinship sphere, to workplace relations and the state. This is where the women workers in Puerto Rico operating in the plants established under Operation Bootstrap and like policies and the women in the EPZs of the Dominican Republic come in. They provide for Safa the data to flesh out this theoretical approach and, conversely, this perspective illuminates their situations.

In the case of the Puerto Rican women, Safa is able to draw on her 50-plus years of association with the island and fieldwork to show how married working women now report that they share household decisions with their husbands, including those relating to the children’s education and major household purchases. This contrasts strongly with what Safa found in her 1959-60 study for The Urban Poor. Most of the married women in her sample for The Myth contribute from 40 to 60 percent of the total household income. Some even more when their husbands
are unemployed or incapacitated in some way. That is, women’s status and authority within the family rose with their economic contribution. Dependence upon the male wage is therefore lessened. However, women still reported that they did a “double shift,” that is, that they worked in paid employment and were also responsible for the majority of the household chores. They also report that as workers they feel neglected by union leadership and political parties alike, and discriminated against by factory managers. After improvements in their standard of living during the 1960s, recent events have challenged these gains and poor women are ever more dependent upon transfer payments such as remittances from abroad but also those such as food stamps and unemployment entitlements provided by the state, “thus substituting public patriarchy for the private patriarchy that existed previously” (1995:96).

Whereas Puerto Rico’s industrialization experience began in the late 1940s, this process is relatively new in the Dominican Republic which finds itself “favored” due to a decline in sugar exports to the United States because of cuts in the U.S. sugar quota, U.S. policies such as the CBI that have provided incentives for U.S. companies to locate their manufacturing and assembly operations in the region, and, especially, because of local currency devaluations which make Dominican workers some of the cheapest in the Caribbean. Safa outlines the impact on Dominican women of the establishment of these factories and the EPZs.
Like their counterparts the world over, Dominican women workers in the EPZs are very young and recent entrants to the labor force, which increases their vulnerability. In Safa’s sample, over 78 percent of the women are migrants, with 60 percent having been living in the city for ten years or less. Relative to men, they have higher education levels. In the country as a whole, 63 percent of women workers in the EPZs have completed secondary school compared to 47 percent of the men. With low pay and familial responsibilities, the women engage in informal economic sector activity and become part of rotating credit associations. Many are victims of workplace harassment and poor treatment by their employers; protests or attempts at unionization result in mass firings. They find no support from a government who intervenes on behalf of employers with repressive measures. As in Puerto Rico, women’s economic contributions to the household are becoming more important.

In Safa’s sample, 38 percent consider themselves to be the principal provider. The results of Dominican women’s workforce experience are contradictory. On the one hand, they are super-exploited because of their gender, because of their youth, because of their newness in the urban areas. But, on the other hand, they are able to bargain more within the household for more power as their economic contributions help them challenge patriarchal family- and kinship-based structures.

And what of working women’s experience in Cuba? What can the Cuba case add to the theoretical debate on the relationships between patriarchy and capitalism? Cuba provides a counterpoint. Safa points to the revolution’s gains for women by arguing that, especially for the younger generation, that is, those who grew up under the revolution, women no longer blindly accept the *casa/calle* distinction. For them, the old idea that

status was conferred on women who were confined to the home is no longer accepted by the younger generation of Cuban women, who have learned a different set of values during the Cuban revolution. Higher educational levels, better job opportunities, lower fertility, and public support for women’s equality have given this younger female generation greater autonomy and self-confidence with which to challenge male dominance. (Safa 1995:127)

Here, Safa might be accused of overstating the case for the revolution’s effects, but she is sanguine when she points out that workplace segregation still persists, with women heavily represented in fields such as education, health, and finance. Furthermore, and despite women’s occupational advances in terms of skills and education acquisition, when men and women work together women are confined to lower-skilled jobs with less or no possibilities for mobility. They are also under-represented as managers. Part of the reason is that the women find themselves...
prioritizing domestic duties over workplace ones. This makes shift work, extra work, training courses, and other avenues to workplace advancement almost impossible. She also relates women’s status as workers to their household responsibilities. Whereas on the one hand some support from the state is provided in childcare facilities and the Family Code that mandates that men and women share domestic responsibilities, on the other hand women still assume the majority of the household tasks and this is exacerbated by multi-generational households (themselves the complex outcome of economic crises and an increase in teenage pregnancies, separations, and consensual unions) which reinforce traditional household divisions of labor.

One final aspect of Safa’s oeuvre is a focus on “race,” ethnicity, and nationalism. Not content to concentrate solely on women’s experience and the intersections of gender with class, underdevelopment, urbanization, and so forth, late in her career Safa has re-kindled her interest in “race,” ethnicity, and nationalism in the region (1987b, 1998b), which earlier she had incorporated into her interest in migration (Safa 1975b). In her earlier works she had discussed these topics in relation to the lot of the residents of Los Peloteros (1974:68-70) and the situation of women workers in the Caribbean (1995:46-56). But this is a new, full-blown research agenda started as she neared official academic
retirement. In 1996, she organized the 45th Annual Conference of the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida, which was entitled “Race, Culture and National Identity in the Afro-American Diaspora.” It drew a number of scholars from the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean and one published result was a special issue of *Latin American Perspectives* edited by Safa entitled “Race and National Identity in the Americas.” But the overarching concerns should not be lost: Hers is an anthropology that seeks to describe and theorize the bases for inequality, and hers is a praxis that seeks to eliminate the obstacles to self-consciousness and self-realization in order to promote self-emancipatory practices.

In 1996, at the spring conference of the American Ethnological Society held in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the AES and the Association of Puerto Rican Anthropologists and Archeologists honored Helen Safa as a Pioneer of Puerto Rican Anthropology. Now professor emerita of Anthropology at the University of Florida, Helen Safa received the 2007 Kalman Silvert award from the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) in recognition of her distinguished career and lifetime contributions to the field.

During the Silvert plenary during the LASA meetings in Montréal, four people spoke of her mentorship, her advice, and her input on their own scholarship. In the presentation titled “Giant Steps,” Lynn Bolles (2007) remarked on the themes that are the bedrock of the corpus of Safa’s research and scholarship: Developing modes of analysis to best understand all forms of inequality, urban issues and valuing the lives and experiences of those under study. “I used the metaphor of jazz and the tune ‘Giant Steps’ to evoke the sense of innovation, collaboration, hard work, persistence and joy in the work and career of Helen Safa. In each of the areas just discussed, scholarship from the 1970s, to the importance of mentorship and network building, another lesson and a new skill was acquired. In each step, what we all learned from Helen Safa was to listen and the importance of being able to synthesize materials from a cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, progressive perspective. This is our intellectual community and our source of revolutionary strength.”

**About this Special Issue**

Recent research on the history of anthropology attempts to locate anthropologists within networks of colleagues and teachers as well as theoretical schools and the social conditions that gave rise to them. This issue attempts to follow this trend by mapping reciprocal processes of influence: it locates Safa and her work within a complex context, and it accounts for the role Safa and her work have played in fashioning studies of
women, labor, urbanization, world-system analyses, and migration, as well as “race,” ethnicity, and nationalism, in Latin America and the Caribbean. Such an approach appropriately begins with intellectual and political biography. As Kevin A. Yelvington shows in his long interview with her, Safa’s anthropology can be located in her early childhood experiences as the daughter of immigrants and the sense of cultural distance that this experience entailed. Her anthropology can also be located in her training at Columbia University, itself preserving its radical reputation through the 1950s when Safa attended and earned her doctorate. And prominent, too, in this story are her close relationships with her Latin American and Caribbean colleagues who themselves found a sympathetic and willing colleague in Safa.

Safa’s reputation was built upon her book *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico*. The book came at a time of not only nationalist foment in relation to the U.S. Civil Rights movement, but also amidst academic controversy over the role of anthropology in what Jorge Duany calls a “Post-Colonial Colony.” Duany, one of the foremost contemporary anthropologists of Puerto Rico and one who possesses a thorough knowledge of the history of anthropology of the island, praises Safa’s work but does not do so uncritically. He points to methodological question marks, and theoretical
directions that only remain implicit rather than elaborated. However, these qualms aside, Duany locates Safa’s *The Urban Poor* as a classic of urban anthropology. The book, he says, set a standard for urban fieldwork, provided what turns out to be retrospectively an important social history of Puerto Rico, linked the local structure of communities with the forces of the global economy, and it anticipated the future of Puerto Rico’s urban and labor politics.

Showing how Safa’s research questions can inspire a significant research program, Alice E. Colón Warren revisits many of Safa’s concerns, such as the impact of women’s work on the household division of labor, the historical development of gender ideologies, and gendered structures in state labor market policies in Puerto Rico through innovative use made of macro data on labor force participation and the characteristics of workers, as well as data derived from a tailor-made research project on women workers. Colón Warren agrees with Safa’s point that these issues must be analyzed as different dimensions in women’s subjection and must be understood in their interconnections in reproducing gender inequality in the different social spheres. Thus, no easy or simply “master concept” can account for all phenomena and take the place of painstaking but theoretically-informed investigations. This is what Safa has modeled for a new generation of theorists. For Colón Warren, women’s increased labor force participation does indeed buy them more autonomy and status within the household. However, there are contradictory effects: women are often forced to bear even more burdens between their formal labor force participation and their domestic responsibilities, and if their autonomy becomes a threat to a marginalized male, marital discord can be the byproduct—especially in the context of men’s declining employment and earnings.

Florence E. Babb, too, draws inspiration from Safa’s leadership and her progressive theoretical and political work. But she also draws specific inspiration from Safa in Babb’s research on sex tourism in Cuba. Babb begins with a consideration of the Cuban state in promoting tourism in general, especially with the advent of the “Special Period” of hardship in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its subsidies to Cuba. She acknowledges that extensive data on sex tourism do not exist and, instead, calls for more qualitative research on the many aspects of the phenomenon. Babb herself grounds her analysis in descriptive ethnography, allowing the theoretical and political issues to emerge through her sensitive use of what she somewhat self-effacingly refers to as “stories” from her fieldwork to illuminate the issues “on the ground” and as crucial fodder for theoretical analysis. In doing so, Babb seeks to cut through the views held by the Cuban state in official circles, those men whose already-racialized and gendered sexual fantasies lead them to Cuba, and, as well,
those views held by Cuban women (and men) whose participation in sex tourism occurs in a time of crisis. And yet, larger political concerns are by no means backgrounded as Babb poses questions of the performance of socialism and the viability of the Cuban model and the performance of post-revolutionary societies more generally.

June C. Nash, one of Safa’s cohorts, takes as her point of departure Safa’s abiding interest in the intersection of ethnicity, class, and gender and how women’s domestic responsibilities are in turn linked to their public sphere of participation, or, as in many cases, non-participation and exclusion. Nash presents some of her latest materials from her more than 50 years of interaction with Maya communities in Chiapas, Mexico, showing how women in the cultural/political autonomy and indigenous rights movements confront the state with the ultimate aim of a “pluricultural coexistence” free from discrimination on many fronts. Characteristically, Nash relates the gendered dimension of their struggle to existing material relationships: Their central role in the semisubsistence and domestic economies, and the “bridging” activities that link these, and how these articulate with larger competition for control over resources in which their communities are engaged. In a comparative case that is instructive for the Caribbean and its students, she shows their courage and fortitude, the risks they are taking, and, indeed, the burden they bear and tragedies that befall some of them for their participation in a praxis of freedom.

This special issue is, thus, an exploration into Safa’s important influence upon scholarship, as well as an account of a “life so far” in anthropology, women’s studies, and Latin American and Caribbean studies.

Notes

1 For a general statement on political economy approaches in anthropology, see Roseberry (1988).

2 This is indeed ironic given the short shrift and outright criticisms dished out to feminist anthropology by Marcus and his associates (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986).

3 It may be worth pointing out that Yelvington in his factory study of women workers in Trinidad (1995) found the opposite: younger women were more likely to advocate for strike action and to offer day-to-day resistance to factory discipline, while the older workers, many with children of their own to feed, were more likely to be conciliatory when faced with management demands and uphold management imperatives.
References


