Locating Gender in Rural Economic Networks

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyzes the growing phenomenon of women’s homework from a critical feminist perspective. It explores how women's involvement in entrepreneurial activities overcomes barriers to formal sector employment. The discussion analyzes the cultural construction of gender identities and the implications for households engaged in home-based work and economic networks that lie outside the hegemonic realm and spaces of capitalism. These practices involve the household as a space of economic activity and gender as a significant relation of production. Poststructuralism and Third World feminism inform the discussion by challenging the dualisms that separate home from work, public from private, and productive from reproductive labor and by setting these activities within global political and economic processes that have transformed women’s lives. International studies of homework, informal sector activities, cooperatives, and other forms of economic practice that inhabit spaces of economic diversity inform our understanding of the contextual aspects of gender and contemporary economic restructuring. The paper illustrates this conceptual framework through an intensive study of homeworkers who participate in a knitting network in rural Appalachia. These activities are shaped by particular gender ideologies and cultural constructions of work, home, and gender that stem from women’s marginalization, yet also provide the means for collective organizing and economic empowerment. In sum, this research examines how the rise of entrepreneurial activities among women intersects with household dynamics and explores the role of gender identities in alternative economic strategies.

Key words: homework, gender and economic restructuring, knitting network, Appalachia
Locating Gender in Rural Economic Networks

The recent growth of female entrepreneurship in small businesses and home-based work is an increasingly important part of the economic landscape in the United States. The Small Business Association (SBA) estimates that employment growth in women-owned businesses exceeds the national average in nearly every region of the country, and these economic activities employ one out of every five workers for a total of 18.5 million employees (SBA 1996). Additionally, women-owned businesses number approximately 8 million firms, one third of all firms in the US. Home-based businesses form an important part of this economic sector with an estimated 8 to 23 percent of the US workforce. Although entrepreneurship among women has grown dramatically over the past few decades, their economic gains have not matched this growth. Gross sales of women's small business owners continue to lag behind men and their economic returns have stagnated in the past decade (Tigges and Green 1994).

Women's entrepreneurship, and especially home-based work, has gained increasing attention from a variety of perspectives. Development studies focus on the socio-economic dimensions of this livelihood strategy in peripheral regions (BenerPa and Roldan 1987; Boris and Prŋgl 1996; Rowbotham and Mitter 1994), historical analyses document early forms of industrial homework done primarily by immigrants and women (Boris and Daniels 1989), and contemporary research on advanced industrial societies explores the role of home-based work as an economic development strategy (Aspaas 1997; Gringeri 1994) and in the service sector (Christensen 1988; Falconer- Al Hindi 1997). This paper contributes to the growing literature on homework by analyzing the cultural construction of gender identities and the implications for households involved in home-based income-generating activities. The paper specifically examines how homeworkers have collectively organized and the viability of these alternative economic strategies for low to middle income households in rural areas.

The discussion draws from poststructural perspectives that offer a critical assessment of hierarchical and universalist approaches that regard capitalism as a hegemonic discourse and emphasizes the plurality of experiences that constitute economic activities. The plurality and diversity that characterize poststructuralism allows one to examine the household as a space of economic activity and gender as a significant relation of production. The analysis also draws from Third World feminism to position these activities within economic processes that have transformed individual lives and their communities. This perspective demonstrates the political engagement of women as they participate in collective economic practices. International studies
of homework, informal sector activities, cooperatives, and other forms of economic practice that inhabit spaces of economic diversity have greatly expanded our understanding of gender identity and contemporary economic restructuring.

The broad themes of entrepreneurship, gender identity, and economic diversity are illustrated in this article through a case study of women’s homework and economic networks in rural Appalachia. This study aims to deconstruct hegemonic notions of capitalism that overlook the contested nature and diverse forms of household income-generating strategies that constitute some of the growth of entrepreneurial activities in contemporary societies, especially among women. These activities are shaped by particular gender ideologies and cultural constructions of ‘work’, ‘home’, and ‘gender’ that further marginalize women, yet also provide the means for their collective organizing and economic empowerment. The empirical study focuses on a network located in West Virginia that is comprised of self-employed homeworkers. The analysis will examine the type and benefits of participation in this network, its intersection with household divisions of labor, and the gender identities and roles involved in this form of entrepreneurship.

The article is organized into six sections. Following the introduction, section two outlines poststructural feminism as a conceptual framework that allows us to move beyond capitalist hegemonic discourses and explore heterogeneous and alternative economic practices such as household economics and community-based networks. In addition, third World feminism challenges western notions of work, women, and home and demonstrates the contested and gendered nature of household economic activities. These perspectives underscore the critical dimension of feminism as a means of understanding why and how women engage in collective entrepreneurial strategies.

Section three reviews different approaches to homework as an alternative economic practice that lies outside the hegemonic discourse of capitalism. Numerous conceptual and empirical approaches to homework have examined its relationship to broader economic restructuring, its intersection with household divisions of labor and gender relations, and the role of the state and labor unions in regulating this form of income generation. The geographical context of the empirical study is outlined in section four. The discussion draws from critical analyses of Appalachian development in contemporary literature that challenge essentialist and universalist assumptions about the region and its people. Emphasis on diversity and plurality of local experiences explode the myths of isolation and social homogeneity in this region. The role
of gender relations and household economic strategies are of particular importance to this analysis of Appalachian regional development.

The methodology is explained in section five. Poststructural feminism involves a critical approach to research that unpacks individual experiences and societal processes. It is particularly relevant to this analysis in that it "demonstrates the need to understand the ways in which global processes are reconstituted in the household through place-based and culturally specific gendered relations" (Staeheli and Lawson 1995: 330). This research explores the implications of women's involvement in entrepreneurship and specifically home-based work through fieldwork that entails semi-structured surveys and in-depth interviews of selected network members. The purpose is to analyze the cultural constructions of gender identities in these activities and the economic and social implications of women’s collective strategies.

The analysis in section six will examine how gender and class are constituted through home-based work and the formation of economic networks in a rural, lesser developed region. Specific attention will be paid to the socio-economic and demographic background of the homeworkers and the social and cultural embeddedness of their economic spaces and activities. Likewise, the network will be analyzed in terms of its production, membership, and stated objectives. Finally, the viability of this rural network and its propensity to improve women’s access to power and economic restructuring are explored. The conclusion summarizes how an increase in entrepreneurial activities among women in advanced industrial contexts can be informed by the analysis of alternative economic strategies in other societies. These perspectives are highly instructive in their focus on household relations, global economic processes, and the construction of gender identities. Studies such as this reinforce the need to extend our categories of analysis and recognize the fluidity, yet commonalities among women’s diverse economic strategies.

Feminist Theorization of Alternative Economic Practices

The theoretical approach used in this paper draws from a combination of literatures that contribute to feminist poststructuralism. This framework forms a complex and multifaceted critique of hegemonic discourses surrounding capitalism, patriarchy, and racism. The critique of these processes provides the basis for deconstructing essentialist notions of class, gender, race, and sexuality (Gibson-Graham 1996; McDowell 1991a; Mohanty 1991; Staeheli and Lawson 1995). Deconstruction is generally seen as a dual process of reversing and displacing
dichotomous terms or oppositional elements such as male/female, culture/nature, or work/home. McDowell (1991a) highlights the theoretical importance of poststructuralism in contemporary society as a means of thinking about pluralities and the importance of diversities rather than unities and universals that are built on oppositional categories and absolute concepts.

Poststructuralism also rests on issues concerning how meaning is constructed and cultural practices are organized through language. Staeheli and Lawson (1995) adopt a feminist perspective to address the dynamic and complex relationship between language and the material social relations that help to construct it.

Because language is inextricable from theoretical understandings and social life, its role in understanding gender relations is problematic. On one hand, language is the central way in which we know gender relations, and on the other hand, language is implicated in constructing and obscuring those very relations. … (Thus), while we cannot escape the limitations of language and representations of the material world, we must use language to engage in political struggle (Staeheli and Lawson 1995: 323).

Feminists have effectively adopted parts of poststructural theory in their challenge of dualisms and dichotomies that separate home from work, public from private, and productive from reproductive labor (Gibson-Graham 1996; McDowell 1991a; Rose 1993). This approach has been particularly useful in feminist geography to discern the role of capitalism and patriarchy in reproducing households and gender relations and more recently to understand the intersection of gender with race, ethnicity, and sexuality. In contrast to conventional scientific knowledge that has been critiqued for its singular notion of truth and a linear view of social progress, feminist scholarship theorizes the multiplicity and differences between social groups. Thus, poststructuralist feminism focuses on diversity within social relationships and analyzes how they are defined in particular contexts for particular purposes.

Poststructuralism has also contributed to contemporary methodological discussions by challenging the quantitative/qualitative dualism that has characterized both positivist science and early feminist research (Lawson 1995; McDowell 1992; Staeheli and Lawson 1995). Lawson (1995) argues that in addition to qualitative research forwarded in much of feminist analyses, quantitative methods can also be effectively used to provoke questions about difference having to do with pattern, process, context, and position. In other words, quantitative techniques are not necessarily incompatible with poststructural feminist research goals (Lawson 1995). This approach moves beyond the constraints that tend to characterize conventional quantitative
methods and employs these same types of analysis to understand differences between gendered subjects.

**Feminism and economic diversity**

The conceptual analysis adopted in this discussion is primarily informed by feminist theory that highlights diversity and difference, particularly in regards to noncapitalist economic activities. This approach aims to counter dominant discourses of the economy and deconstruct the sometimes hidden, but crucial elements of economic and social reproduction. The analysis draws from several studies that offer a feminist critique of hegemonic capitalist discourses and explore economic activities and social relations ‘beyond the firm,’ in households and communities (Gibson-Graham 1996; Lawson 1995; Teltscher 1993). Lawson (1995), for example, urges a fuller theorization of non-economic and non-capitalist dimensions of social life that can connect feminist analyses of gender divisions of labor and industrial geography’s focus on workplace divisions of labor. She does this through an empirical analysis of the feminization of Quito’s garment industry in order to understand the diverse construction of informal work and the ways in which gender roles and relations are being reworked for these women and their families.

Gibson-Graham (1996) also call for a reexamination of the notion that workers are uniformly subordinated by industrial capitalism. Their analysis of class processes in contemporary economic restructuring demonstrates that labor produces surplus for distribution in all sites where work is performed, including households, businesses, and collective enterprises. These are sites of economic difference that are shaped by multiple social relations. In their view, landscapes of economic difference involve capitalist and non-capitalist class relations.

Thus, a project of class differentiation challenges hierarchies of domination and difference – from class-based difference to those of gender, race, and ethnicity. This perspective extends the theme of difference and diversity to the economic sphere where it is “possible to inhabit a heterogeneous and open-ended economic space whose identity was not fixed or singular” (Gibson-Graham 1996: 5). The concept of non-capitalist economic practices developed in this paper undermines the hegemonic discourse of capitalism and instead focuses on the plurality and heterogeneity of economic forms that include home-based work, grassroots producer groups, and local development initiatives for self-employed producers.
Some of these alternative economic practices are relevant to flexible production and economic activities that are associated with contemporary economic reorganization. Recent literature on flexible production emphasizes the social and spatial dimensions of this reorganization that include the shift from vertical integration and hierarchical mass production systems to a growing level of interaction among firms in subcontracting relations, partnerships, and other forms of collaborative networking (Gertler 1995; Storper 1993). The significance of non-economic processes such as cooperation, trust, and reciprocity reinforce the historical, cultural, and social forces governing network relationships. The literature on flexible production contributes to this research by emphasizing how geographic concepts of proximity and context are critical to the development of network systems. Emphasis on local embeddedness in shaping flexible production systems is demonstrated in a wide range of empirical examples that underscore the danger of generalizing across networks and locales.

Although these analyses of economic networks address important social and spatial dimensions of production reorganization, gender relations and the private sphere of the household have been largely overlooked. As has been argued above, conventional analyses of economic restructuring tend to separate both conceptually and empirically the private domestic sphere from the public workplace. In contrast, feminist analyses of economic restructuring emphasize the intersection of productive and reproductive labor and the gendered nature of shifting labor processes and production reorganization (Hanson and Pratt 1992; Little 1994; Massey 1994; McDowell 1991b).

Third world feminist perspectives on gender and work

The growing literature by women of color or third world feminists also contributes to our understanding of diverse economic practices and entrepreneurial activity among marginalized women (Mohanty 1991; Kandiyoti 1994; Spivak 1988). This work developed around a critique of Western feminism for failing to incorporate diversity and difference into its construction of gender identities and relations. It was argued that feminist theory operated from a position of cultural imperialism in which gender relations are represented from white, middle-class, heterosexual experiences (Mohanty 1991). Having demonstrated the biases of Western feminism, and differences among women in the global South, Third World feminism has increasingly focused on feminist praxis and struggles of resistance to the oppression of women. This perspective counters the postmodern discourse popular in western feminism which
“attempts to move beyond essentialism by pluralizing and dissolving the stability and analytic utility of the categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (Alexander and Mohanty 1997: xvii). According to them, the domination and subordination that occur through racism, capitalism, and patriarchy require the formation of identities that are simultaneously social and political.

These alternative constructions of gender identities and relations of power are relevant to discussions of economic practices among women in developing contexts. In an influential piece on feminist resistance in the face of almost total capitalist domination, Mohanty (1997) calls for a reconceptualization of the way we think about third world women.

Making Third World women workers visible in this gender, race, class formation involves engaging a capitalist script of subordination and exploitation. But it also leads to thinking about the possibility of emancipatory action on the basis of the reconceptualization of Third World women as agents rather than victims (Mohanty 1997: 7).

Contemporary feminist literature stemming from the South challenges conventional representations of women as passive victims of restructuring and colonial forces and offer valid accounts of their independence and renegotiated gender roles in the face of economic hardship. Mohanty (1997) invokes the idea of focusing not so much on ‘the work that women do’, or even the occupations they have, but the ideological construction of jobs and tasks in terms of dominant notions of femininity, domesticity, (hetero)sexuality, and racial and cultural stereotypes. This perspective is extremely useful in understanding how the naturalization of capitalist processes and women’s work is constitutively defined and culturally constructed by dominant norms of femininity, domesticity, and work.

Although these economic activities occur in a variety of places, Third World literature also demonstrates the importance of household relations in the cultural constructions of women’s and men’s roles. Extensive studies within feminism focus on intra-household hierarchies of power and struggle and how these power relations shed light on the construction of particular household divisions of labor and income-generating strategies (BenerPa and Feldman 1992; Chant 1997; Folbre 1988; Radcliffe 1990). By analyzing the household as inseparable from the workplace, the cultural construction of these supposedly distinct spheres within hegemonic capitalist discourse is falsified and contested in diverse forms of economic practices that lie outside the formal realm of capitalism.
In sum, gender relations and the intersection of productive and reproductive labor in the workplace and household are important aspects of women's entrepreneurship. Poststructural feminism emphasizes the prevalence of gender ideologies in household economic strategies and the increasingly flexible labor processes such as homework and informalization of work that can be considered non-capitalist or lie outside the dominant realms of economic activity. This discussion also demonstrates how economic activities are influenced by dominant gender relations in specific contexts and the intersection of household, community, and regional scales of economic restructuring. The conceptual themes outlined in this section are applied to the following discussion of homework as a form of entrepreneurial activity in diverse geographical contexts and social locations.

Analyzing Homework in Cross-Cultural Contexts

Women’s participation in entrepreneurial activities such as homework is embedded within certain gender identities and geographical contexts. Before turning to these themes, it is useful to briefly examine the extensive literature on women’s homework. In perhaps one of the most comprehensive collections of articles by advocates and researchers on homework, Boris and Pręgl (1996) outline several official definitions that have emerged as labor groups, industrialists, and development organizations are having to contend with the multiple aspects of this increasingly prevalent form of economic activity. The International Labor Organization (ILO) defines homework as the production of goods or the provision of services for an employer or contractor in which the work is carried out at the place of the worker’s own choosing, often the worker’s own home (International Labour Conference 1994). This organization is involved in numerous strategies to make homework visible and organize them without threatening their source of income (Boris and Pręgl 1996). Western scholars tend to examine homework as industrial and clerical labor, while third world analysts approach it as part of the informalization of labor. Its position within the development process is oftentimes highly exploitative due to the vulnerability of these workers. The variety of homework can thus be categorized according to the type of activity undertaken as well as the labor relations involved in the production and marketing of goods and services. Finally, although homework has been affected by the recent spread of information technology, labor intensive, relatively unskilled tasks remain a common form of homework.
This analysis defines homework very broadly to encompass a variety of types of work, suppliers, and labor relations that include the self-employed, subcontractors, and those who work totally outside the regulated work force. Phizacklea and Wolkowitz (1995) argue that using a broad definition of homework allows one to analyze the gendered aspects of women’s home-based work as well as the impact of social relations such as class, gender, and racialization. In addition, this project problematizes the term ‘homework’ as it is constituted by specific gender identities and cultural relations that contextualize the experience of homeworkers. That homework is dominated by women reinforces the gendered dynamics associated with why and how women engage in this type of income-generating activity. The remainder of this section addresses the impact of economic restructuring on this type of income-generating strategy, the gendered nature of home-based work, and the role of state policy and labor unions in regulating homework. The discussion explores the relationship between home-based work and broader economic processes that contribute to the increasing labor flexibility and contingent workforce filled by homework.

**Homework, economic restructuring, and globalization**

Economic restructuring and the globalization of capital has accompanied a growth in flexible work organization that is linked to the increase in home-based work among some of the more contingent workforce such as ethnic minorities, immigrants, and women (Fernández-Kelly and Sassen 1995; Phizacklea and Wolkowitz 1995). Small-scale production and flexible work processes employing low paid, part-time, and temporary workers typify the forms of production organization found in many decentralized industries. As mentioned above, it is essential to recognize gender as a significant analytical category and the household as an important spatial context of these economic activities. According to Boris and Prőgl (1996), homework is an important part of structural shifts in international capitalism that impact women’s economic positions in various regions of the world. Developing regions in southern Europe, for example, have been the focus of numerous studies on homework. In Spain, Benton (1990) examines the prevalence of women homeworkers in decentralized production in the electronics and shoe industries. She emphasizes gender as an important social category in understanding the decentralization strategies of industrial firms in the Valencia region. In addition, the social and spatial dimensions of the household are crucial to the reorganization of work in the context of increasing international competition. Home-based work is a central part of flexible
manufacturing in the Third Italy where home-based production in the textile, clothing, and leather industry is primarily done by women (Mingione 1991). Here, the relatively diverse regional economy is built on small and medium enterprises that subcontract out to even smaller firms and homeworkers (Scott 1988). Institutional support provided by the state and industrial associations are geared to helping firms deal with market fluctuations.

Analyses of informal sector activities and homework in developing countries have also focused on the incorporation of these forms of income-generation into the global economy. Maria Mies’ (1982) classic study of lacemakers in Narsapur, India is an excellent illustration of how women are integrated into the international division of labor. In this industry, both class/caste and gender relations led to a feminization of the production process and a masculinization of the non-producer or trade jobs: in short, men sold women’s produce and lived on profits from women’s labor. Mohanty (1997:12) uses this study to show how “ideologies of gender and work and their historical transformation provide the necessary ground for the exploitation of the lacemakers.” Women’s depiction as housewife and non-laborer allowed capital to take advantage of these homeworkers under specific caste and patriarchal cultures. Additionally, White’s (1994) study of female small-scale producers in Turkey shows how social and gender ideologies devalue women’s work in national and international markets. Her in-depth ethnographic research on women who worked in ateliers or did piecework suggested that their labor was being exploited by merchants, intermediaries, and exporters who profited from the sale of the products made by these women. White (1994:1) argues that the syncretism of capitalism and local culture is “a basic mechanism by which international business takes advantage of the cultural construction of labor and of the production process to create a pool of cheap, expendable, primarily female labor force.”

Finally, Lawson (1992; 1995b) has undertaken extensive research in Ecuador that highlights the relationship between the marginalization of women homeworkers and externally imposed structural adjustment programs. She documents how the process of restructuring has been profoundly gendered through refigured factory and household divisions of labor. Many of these studies illustrate the relevance of homework to broader economic restructuring and globalization of capital. The structural shifts draw in women as marginalized workers, but also help to shape gender ideologies and identities that are contextualized in particular social locations of workers and dominant cultural relations.
Industrial homework has also been analyzed in advanced industrial countries, drawing from similar debates, but addressing somewhat different issues as those presented in developing contexts. Many of these studies are couched within economic development literature that outlines not only the motivations behind people’s engagement in homework, but the impacts of these income-generating strategies on local economies. Gringeri (1994), for example, offers an in-depth analysis of industrial homework among women in the rural Midwest. She outlines this form of homework as an economic activity for rural housewives who are employed as independent contractors for automotive suppliers. These firms have adopted a strategy of subcontracting work to independent producers in order to benefit from the flexibility and savings on insurance and overhead costs (Gringeri 1994). Broader economic processes are instrumental to this form of work in the US Midwest because an increasing number of rural women have been seeking employment as a result of the 1980s agricultural crisis. Her research explores how industrial homework has become an integral part of economic development in two economically depressed, rural communities. In addition, Mackenzie (1987) has undertaken research on a different type of homework in peripheral regions of Canada. In her study, people develop home-based businesses and cooperative networks partly in response to declining employment opportunities in mining and forestry. Most of these businesses are run by women and include childcare and artisanal manufacturing. Studies such as these demonstrate that the conditions of homework become embedded in the dynamics, relationships, and labor divisions of the household as the locus of work.

Industrial homework also extends to social locations where first and third worlds meet. Research on immigrant homeworkers in developed contexts illustrate how marginalized workers are constituted by dominant racial and class relations. In the UK, Phizacklea and Wolkowitz (1995) emphasize the different experiences of women homeworkers in ethnic and class-divided societies. Their study includes Asian women in the clothing industry where employment is less secure and lower paid. Fern<ndez-Kelly and Sassen (1995) focus on a different group of immigrant homeworkers in the electronics and textile industry in Southern California. Their work on Mexican women demonstrates how dominant ideologies of ethnicity and gender have influenced their participation in informal activities where jobs are insecure and pay is low. In many cases, these forms of production organization are embedded within gender and racial stereotypes that are prevalent in the larger culture.
In sum, homework is an international phenomenon linked to economic restructuring and globalization of production. Ideologies of gender and work in diverse contexts tend to locate women in particularly exploitative situations as they participate in industrial homework and other entrepreneurial activities. The following discussion shifts the focus of this analysis to contemporary service provision by homeworkers, particularly domestic services among the middle class and home-based office work.

*Gendering home-based service work*

The gendered nature of homework and its intersection with household relations is highlighted by the increasing analyses in feminist geography literature on the provision of domestic work (Gregson and Lowe 1994; Pratt 1997) and office services (Christensen 1988; Falconer 1993; Falconer-Al Hindi 1997). This discussion claims that the type of service provided and the motivation behind this form of economic activity are shaped by dominant gender ideologies of work and home. For example, domestic services such as cleaning, childcare, cooking, and provision of other household tasks are situated within specific ideologies of gender, class, and ethnicity that are closely related to women's roles in society. The first part of this discussion addresses domestic labor as a form of homework even though it is generally performed in a home other than that of the provider.

One of the most comprehensive analyses of domestic services in feminist geography is based on Gregson and Lowe’s (1993; 1994) extensive study of waged domestic labor among middle class families in late 20th century Britain. Their analysis of the relations among cleaners and nannies and their employers in contemporary Britain underscore how these services are mediated by dominant ideologies surrounding gender and class. According to Gregson and Lowe (1994), social identities are instrumental in waged domestic labor as middle- and upper-class women fulfill roles as ‘keepers of the hearth’ while working-class women engage in hard physical labor in these households. Women’s increased entry into the formal workforce has provided the conditions in which middle-class households see the need to substitute waged domestic labor for their own unwaged household labor, thus continuing to define household labor primarily as the responsibility of women. This situation is relevant to Pratt’s (1997) study of nannies in Vancouver, British Columbia. Her study focuses on the way in which racial stereotypes of nannies are constructed by agencies, governmental policies, and individual practices. Domestic work is also important in feminist research on homework and contingent
labor in developing regions. For example, domestic work is a common means of income-generation among rural women who migrate to urban areas in Latin America (Eaton 1992; Lawson 1998; Radcliffe 1990). Feminist studies of this form of labor examine the ways in which cultural constructions of femininity shape these types of work and the conditions under which they labor. These jobs are clear extensions of domestic, caretaking, and mothering roles that are often low-paid, however, these women may benefit from schooling or training provided by their host families (Radcliffe 1990).

Several feminist studies on domestic labor highlight the ethnic and racial basis of the relationship between employers and domestic workers (Cock 1980; Preston-Whyte 1991; Radcliffe 1990). These studies emphasize how domestic workers live and work in situations shaped by dominant social practices surrounding race and ethnicity. For example, in Peru, peasant women from rural areas sometimes work as domestics in the predominantly mestizo culture of the cities that looks down on the peasant identity and communities (Radcliffe 1990). In South Africa, domestic work is an important informal sector occupation for many rural women who work in urban areas as maids and nannies and send most of their earnings home (Bozzoli 1991; Preston-Whyte 1991). Bozzoli (1991) provides a detailed account of the lives and experiences of several black South African women who went to the city for domestic work. These women would sometimes live in servants’ quarters with their employers while their husbands lived and worked in other urban areas. It was not uncommon for women employed as domestic servants to be gone for months at a time, leaving their children in the care of family and friends. The employment of domestics in these contexts leads to a somewhat contradictory construction of the waged domestic as the ‘other’: they are socially demarcated in uniforms and with specific living and eating arrangements while often included as ‘one of the family’ to justify the use of paid nannies and cooks in personal services (Preston-Whyte 1991). These diverse geographic and social contexts provide highly relevant analyses of how gender and race are embedded within economic strategies of women.

The final example of home-based service provision is the growing sector of office services and small businesses that are associated with expanding information and communication technology. In recent decades, the significant increase in women-owned businesses, especially home-based work, can be partly attributed to use of telecommunication technology such as computer modems and facsimile machines. In many cases, homeworkers can more easily afford and access personal computers, high-speed telecommunications, and the Internet to operate
businesses out of their households (Christensen 1993; Falconer 1993). These activities are also shaped by dominant gender ideologies surrounding the types of work undertaken, as well as how they intersect with social reproduction. Studies that address how these activities differ by gender indicate that men are attracted to the convenience and desire to be around families and homes, whereas women tend to see it as an opportunity to accommodate unpaid domestic labor while undertaking paid work (Ahrentzen 1990; Christensen 1988; Falconer-Al-Hindi 1997). In an extensive analysis of clerical and office service homework, Christensen (1988) concludes that combining home responsibilities and this form of income generation creates additional stress for women.

Falconer (1993) also addresses the disadvantages that stem from dominant gender ideologies surrounding women’s homework in her analysis of telecommuters in the Lexington, Kentucky area. She found that telecommuting leads to an overall increase in women’s workdays by positioning them as both productive and social reproductive labor. Whether the homework was full or part time, Falconer observed that the hours spent by women on domestic labor ranged from 40 to 48 hours per week. Additionally, Ahrentzen (1990; 1997) critically analyzes the social construction and diverse meanings of home in her examination of women who use it as an occupational workplace. She argues that “women’s experiences of home space reflect an interaction between socially structured opportunities, constraints, and expectations relevant to gender, class, age, and race, and women’s active attempts to respond to these structures” (Ahrentzen 1997: 78). One of her interviewees described the blurred distinctions between home and work, especially for women, by stating that ‘staying at home has made her a housewife!’ The empirical studies of home-based service workers highlighted above illustrate the shifting nature of homework in the context of a growing service-based economy. This discussion raises important issues about the intersection of gender ideologies and household labor in diverse cultural contexts.

**The role of the state and labor unions in regulating homework**

During the post World War II period, state policy and labor unions have played an important role in the type and extent of homework that occurs in the US. Their positions toward this form of work is consistent with the state's efforts to accommodate the reorganization of capital and labor's attempts to improve working conditions for all workers. At the international level, advocates have only recently begun to organize and put pressure on policy-makers in
efforts to garner recognition and protection for homeworkers (Boris and Pringle 1996). Various non-governmental and international organizations have sponsored conferences to provide information on and network around international homeworker movements. Efforts to organize homeworkers stem from a long history of exploitation and poor working conditions throughout the world and are a response to the practices of government at international, national, and local levels that recreate home-based work as a marginal and low-paid activity. The lack of regulation by government policy has also contributed to exploitation of homeworkers, especially during periods of early industrialization. Boris and Daniel’s (1989) analysis of homework in 19th century Western Europe and the US documents the growth in women homeworkers as taking place outside labor legislation and state intervention. Early protective legislation surrounding hours, wages, and work conditions ignored home-based workers, thus opened up the possibility of tremendous exploitation and negative consequences. Part of the reason for this was because they were largely marginalized workers and disproportionately women.

The improvement of working conditions for home-based labor in the US has been increasingly addressed in recent decades. Labor unions and state organizations, however, continue to debate the level of intervention and extent of worker protection that is needed under labor laws. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 was designed to protect workers with minimum working standards, but many argue that homeworkers were not adequately covered in regards to classification, remuneration, and benefits (Herod 1991). The biggest problem in this type of work is the enforcement of regulations among employers (Boris 1996).

More recent studies of industrial homework have focused on the deregulation of homework during the Reagan and Bush Administrations (Gringeri 1994; Herod 1991). In the 1980s, widespread lifting of regulations prohibiting homework in industries such as knitted outerwear, embroidery and jewelry, and more recently women’s apparel. These regulations were meant to give women and particularly mothers much greater choice in their employment options. Labor unions have also begun to organize in opposition to homework because it undermines the gains they have made in regards to minimum wages and working conditions. As Herod (1991) points out, however, the labor movement’s efforts to ban homework instead of understanding the political and economic context, have only hurt its efforts to curb what it sees as an exploitative form of labor. He argues that women’s limited employment opportunities force them to engage in homework for minimum wages and few benefits. Home-based employment opportunities resulting from state economic development strategies must also be couched in a social context.
For example, Gringeri’s (1994) research documents how the government reinforces gender constructs as private development corporations designed low-paid automobile assembly work for farm wives while creating stable factory jobs for men.

In sum, the state and labor unions play a role in regulating homework. The intersection of gender, class, and ethnicity in the cross-cultural studies of homework outlined above is influenced by state policy and the position of labor towards this form of work. Herod (1991) argues that limiting women’s formal employment options in the face of economic restructuring will only reinforce their social identity and ultimately marginalize those who choose to do homework. To counter this, he calls for a political strategy that does not simply ban homework, but recognizes many of the social and economic contexts in which homework has grown.

**Economic Transformation and Gendered Livelihood Strategies in Rural Appalachia**

Alternative economic strategies such as home-based work and economic networks are embedded in distinct socio-spatial contexts and often represent important forms of resistance to economic marginalization. This section locates the theorization of socially-embedded economic strategies outlined above in the case study region of rural Appalachia. Many women in this region have been historically marginalized from waged employment, thus have relied on alternative forms of income-generation that include economic networks and homework. The research for this project is primarily based in West Virginia, the only state within the boundaries of the Appalachian Regional Commission and one of the most rural states in the region of Appalachia (Figure 1).

This discussion draws from poststructuralist approaches in Appalachian studies that challenge universalist assumptions about the region. These assumptions are based on the construction of Appalachia as a uniform region inhabited by an homogeneous population. Essentialist images of a white Anglo-Saxon folk remain frozen in time in many historical and even contemporary accounts of Appalachia. Most notable among these is Weller’s (1969) *Yesterday’s People* which relates the physical isolation of this mountainous region to the mental and cultural isolation of the people.

In contrast, more critical Appalachian scholarship emphasizes the contextual aspects of social, economic, and cultural processes and the need for deconstruction of the social myth of Appalachia (Batteau 1990; Fischer 1993; Pudup et al 1995; Smith 1995). Recent contributions to this literature challenge the concept of Appalachian exceptionalism and argue that careful
study of socio-economic and cultural patterns reveal broad parallels to the development of other American regions (Pudup et al 1995). This section outlines gender and economic development in Appalachia before discussing the organization of economic networks in this region.

**Gender and economic development in Appalachia**

The economic background and geographic context of rural Appalachia provide an empirical starting point for this research on gender and household relations. While the physical geography and connection to the national economy differ considerably within the region, most areas, especially in Central Appalachia, share general patterns of labor exploitation and rural isolation that have contributed to their economic peripheralization. The physical geography of Appalachia has produced a region rich in natural resources which attracted outside capital on a large scale towards the end of the 19th century (Lewis 1998; Pudup, Billings, and Waller 1995). During this period, firms based outside the region increased their investment in the timber industry, coal mining, and natural gas fields. Communities throughout this area expanded their economic activities and grew in population as migrants from Europe and the southern US came to work in the coal fields and timber industry.

Gender relations and divisions of labor have been important factors in the economic development and cultural identity of this region. This analysis examines the diversity of activity and moves beyond dominant constructions of gender and the economy to explore the multitude of culturally-embedded livelihood strategies. Productive and reproductive labor was clearly divided along gender lines (with some important exceptions) as men worked in the mines, mills, and factories and women were largely involved in household reproductive activities (Greene 1990). Some women, however, contributed to their household incomes by taking in boarders, selling garden produce, or providing important services in the community such as laundry or child care (Pudup 1990). Other women were employed outside the home in textile and knitting mills, glassware shops, and tobacco factories (Hensley 1990).

Social differentiation among Appalachian women is embedded within their diverse class, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. An important contribution to the growing feminist literature on gender in Appalachia is Smith’s (1999) edited collection of work on the relational construction of difference within and among diverse groups of Southern women. She critiques the conceptualization of society as a grid of boxes (differences) into which individual members fit, and instead focuses on the interdependent and relational nature of these differences as
exceptionally vivid (Smith 1999). This is exemplified by working-class women in eastern Kentucky who were once dependent on their coal miner husbands and now support their families by caring for children of middle-class women who can pursue their careers. The historical construction of race, class, and gender in Appalachia is also important to understand the economic situation of women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Black women from the South and immigrant women from various places in Europe tended to migrate to the state’s larger population areas in search of wage labor in factories, inns, private houses, and laundry services. In contrast, white, native-born women who comprised the majority of West Virginia women tended to remain in their rural communities and did not seek employment outside the home (Pudup 1990). Overall, women's primary role in the reproductive realm of the household varied among women, but did not preclude them from engaging in economic activities that helped to support their households.

Contemporary economic restructuring has had a significant impact on women’s employment and household economic strategies in Appalachia. Parts of this region have experienced economic decline since the 1970s that has lead to further marginalization of women, households, and communities (Oberhauser et al 1996). Much of this decline is associated with the collapse of the coal industry as competition from cheaper sources of coal increased and clean air standards lowered the demand for high sulfur coal from this region. In addition, the shift to a service-based economy contributed to increasing numbers of women entering the workforce. Women, however, remain segregated in lower status jobs. Much of this occupational segregation in lower status jobs is due to dominant gender ideologies that associate women with domestic roles and reproductive labor. Figure 2 compares the proportion of women in major industrial sectors in West Virginia and the United States. In general, variations in the proportion of female employment in primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors is similar at these two scales, however, WV has a higher concentration of women in the service sectors. In 1993, WV women comprised 48.4 percent of employment in the growing trade sector compared to 46.7 percent in the US. Additionally, 63.2 percent of the finance, insurance and real estate (FIRE) sector and 65.8 percent of the service sector were female in WV (WV Bureau of Employment Programs 1993) (Figure 2). Wage differentials between men and women in these sectors translate to lower incomes for women. In 1990, WV women workers, including part time workers, earned an average of 45 cents for every dollar earned by men. Translated to median annual incomes, WV
women on average earn $7,287 compared to men’s average income of $16,030 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990).

Despite this growth in certain female-dominated sectors, the participation rate among WV women remains relatively low. For example, in West Virginia, 43 percent of working age women were employed in 1995 compared to 57 percent at the national level (Hannah 1995). One consequence of the relatively low labor force participation rate is the high rate of poverty among West Virginia women, 21 percent compared to 15 percent at the national level (Hannah 1995). This low rate of female economic activity is related to the fact that for some women, formal employment outside the home is not a feasible income-generating strategy. Specifically, lack of access to transportation, domestic responsibilities, inadequate job training or previous work experience, and other barriers prevent women from entering the workforce (Oberhauser 1995a; 1995b). In sum, this discussion has outlined how dominant gender ideologies and cultural constructions of home and work in Appalachia present obstacles to women in their economic activities. These issues are relevant to the following analysis of the prevalence and nature of economic networks in this region.

Women’s economic networks in rural Appalachia

The economic marginalization of women in rural Appalachia has contributed to the phenomenon of home-based work and other entrepreneurial activities. Similar to women’s economic strategies in developing regions mentioned above, many women in this region engage in informal activities to help support their households, especially during periods when the primary source of household income is reduced or cut off completely (Oberhauser and Turnage 1999). Some of these activities involve economic networks that produce and market goods and services. Economic networks are often based on social relations such as kinship or community connections that have a long history within this region (Halperin 1990). Moreover, the networks found in parts of Appalachia are partly shaped by the rural nature of this area that tends to isolate families and communities, yet also strengthens their connection to place and home.

The empirical component of this analysis draws from an ongoing study by the author on gender and economic restructuring in rural Appalachia. Some important comparisons can be made between the networks highlighted in this study and the alternative economic activities and informal work in Third World literature discussed above. Appalachian networks tend to be highly embedded in the local socio-economic and political context that shape their operation and
membership in multiple ways. The example highlighted in this study is a knitting network comprised mostly of women. The network is a non-profit organization aimed at community-based economic development. These types of organizations are not extensively studied in the economic network or flexible network literature (for exceptions see Malecki and Tootle 1996), yet are readily found in international analyses of informal economic activities and micro-enterprise development. The discussion focuses on the potential for these types of economic networks to not only provide goods and services for rapidly changing markets, but to develop viable income-generating alternatives for women in rural areas.

In sum, gender and economic development in Appalachia are related to women’s divergent histories and social locations and their role in household economies. Incorporating these social relations and income-generating strategies leads to a more critical and transformative analysis of the economy. Poststructuralism provides an in-depth understanding of the economic and social aspects of gendered activities by opening up categories that have been presented as hegemonic in conventional approaches. Appalachia is a peripheral region in an advanced industrial country that has been historically dependent on raw material extraction and class-based labor exploitation, yet developed distinct forms of racial and gender discrimination. This approach critiques the dominant discourse of Western feminism that ignores marginalized voices and often overlooks the diverse social locations of women. By critically analyzing the ideologies of class, race, and gender associated with women’s participation in home-based work and collective economic activities, one can better understand the complexity of entrepreneurial strategies.

**Research Methodology and Appalachian Fieldwork**

This research contributes to contemporary analyses of gender and economic restructuring by focusing on the role of home-based work and collective economic strategies in rural contexts. The methodology employed in this project integrates the conceptual framework and empirical analyses outlined above to better understand collective economic strategies and specifically their potential to empower socially and economically marginalized women. Feminist poststructuralism informs this methodological approach by constructing a framework to analyze economic strategies that lie outside hegemonic capitalist discourse and are situated in social and spatial dimensions of the household and community. It also moves beyond the focus on similar patterns and concepts that characterize conventional methods and employs both quantitative and
Qualitative methods to understand differences between gendered subjects (Staeheli and Lawson 1995).

Feminist research has contributed to our understanding of the gendering of everyday life and how power relations impact livelihood strategies and unequal access to resources (Reinharz 1992). Feminist geography is particularly well positioned to examine the experience of women in households and communities by exploring links between gender relations and specific places (McDowell 1992). The methodology in this project draws from this scholarship to examine how marginalized people, particularly women, negotiate the social and spatial aspects of their daily lives to overcome oppression. The methodology also identifies both researchers and subjects as active agents in the production of knowledge and highlights the importance of reflexivity in the research process (Dyck 1993; England 1994). In this project, I related to the subjects in multiple ways, depending on the context and their positionality.

This research specifically employs feminist qualitative and participatory methods of research to analyze gender and household-based economic strategies. Qualitative methods such as intensive interviews allow the researcher to uncover diverse aspects of women’s economic activities and provide more comprehensive records of their experiences and attitudes. Additionally, participatory methods such as focus groups have become more frequently adopted in gender and development projects, especially in regions of the South, but also in peripheral regions of the North. Participation and community empowerment are intended to involve people in identifying the socio-economic and political processes that affect them and developing solutions which are appropriate for their needs. While some critics of participatory methods claim they are a form of manipulation or intervention, the techniques used in this approach can act as a catalyst for empowerment “through which individuals, as well as local groups and communities, identify and shape their lives and the kind of society in which they live” (Slocum et al 1995:4). In sum, feminist qualitative and participatory research supports the conceptual framework adopted in this analysis by probing the complexity and culturally-embedded nature of gendered economic strategies.

This discussion draws from ongoing research by the author on women's homework in rural Appalachia. An earlier part of this study involved interviews with individual homeworkers and led to the current focus on economic networks such as Appalachain By Design (ABD). Figure 1 indicates the location of the nearly sixty members in ABD of whom twenty participated directly in the study through focus groups or intensive interviews. The participants in the
interviews were identified through a series of methods. The initial group of homeworkers was selected through a snowball sampling method that involved contacts with various community groups, university extension offices, and from postings in local businesses and organizations. The members of ABD interviewed during the second phase agreed to this in the annual survey administered by the network. Twenty members agreed to participate in the interviews and eighteen members were eventually contacted. Most of the interviews took place in the participants’ homes, however, one occurred in a local restaurant and three by telephone because it was more convenient. The interviews addressed household demographics and the socio-economic background of the homeworkers as well as the motivation for and implications of involvement in these economic activities. In addition, focus groups with a total of ten homeworkers provided another means of obtaining information about the network and the members. This method is particularly helpful in observing interaction and dynamics among the members.

The ABD knitting network is a non-profit organization aimed at community-based economic development. The discussion draws from analyses of micro-enterprise activities and entrepreneurship in the gender and development literature in examining the potential for these types of economic networks to not only provide goods and services for rapidly changing markets, but to develop viable income-generating alternatives for women in semi-peripheral and rural areas. My involvement with ABD has evolved significantly over the past seven years from casual interaction to collaborative research and cooperation with the organization. The vice president and I are currently conducting an evaluation of the network and specifically its impact on households and communities. The process of increasing my involvement with this network has entailed extensive effort and time. Initially, the graduate students who worked with me and I were regarded with some distrust as outsiders, but over the years this has been replaced by an increased understanding of our intentions and how this research complements some of their goals. For example, they have been able to use some of our results for evaluation of their network and in fund-raising efforts. This work addresses broader questions relating to feminist methodology that often involves the integration of academic research and activism. In this case, qualitative, participatory approaches increase the possibility of interactive and empowering research.

Appalachian By Design: A Flexible Economic Network
The manufacturing network Appalachian By Design, Inc. (ABD) provides an interesting example of a cooperative network that produces and markets goods. As stated above, this organization is a non-profit brokering firm that coordinates a network of approximately sixty self-employed people. The members are mostly women who manufacture knitwear for sale to apparel design companies throughout the country. The network is based in West Virginia, but involves members who live in surrounding states of Maryland and Virginia. This analysis focuses on ABD because of its specific designation as a community-based economic network and its stated goal of empowering women in rural areas.

ABD was initially part of the Center for Economic Options, a non-profit economic development organization based in Charleston, West Virginia. It began with eight women who were contracted to fill an order for Esprit International in California. The network became a free-standing non-profit organization in 1994 and has grown to a complex network of knitters, finishers, and production coordinators, most of whom work as independent contractors in their homes. The network offers a flexible service to apparel firms with the capacity to deliver quality work in large batches of 500 to 2,000 garments or small specialty orders (Appalachian By Design 1994). ABD customers represent a variety of large and small businesses that range from an up-scale catalogue firm in California to a nationally based furniture chain. Recent efforts to market their knitwear include development of a wholesale line to provide consistent work for the network and avoid seasonal fluctuations of the contract sweater industry. Some of their items include Christmas stockings, throw pillows, and children's wear illustrated in the photos in Figure 2. In 1995, home-based knitters in this network produced over 6,000 knitwear items worth $145,000. These sales generated approximately $120,000 in income to the network members (Economic Development Digest 1996). In 1998, the income to knitters and staff increased to over $350,000 (ABD 1999).

In addition to marketing their products, this network provides training and offers professional opportunities to its members. Training is done before the knitter starts working for the network and after they have joined the network through regularly organized workshops. ABD recruits new knitters from people who have completed a series of training workshops and have demonstrated a certain proficiency in production knitting that includes operating a knitting machine. Computerized knitting machines ensure the efficiency and flexibility that is required to accommodate quick shifts in the design, quality, and style of the knitwear. These also provide a barrier to some people who cannot afford to purchase or borrow money for a machine. This
issue is discussed further below, but remains an important factor in determining who can participate in the network.

The organization of ABD is instrumental in producing quality knitwear among women scattered throughout rural Appalachia. The network has had to build total quality control into several steps of its production process. Despite the remote and rural location of many of their members, they communicate relatively frequently and assist each other with patterns, design, or equipment. Approximately six knitters are designated as lead knitters who work with designers to create the patterns, train the knitters, and act as contact people during production (ABD 1994). These knitters often oversee production centers or local sites where patterns for the knitwear are taught, yarn is distributed, and finished goods are inspected before being shipped to the network headquarters. Home-based manufacturing is a viable job option in the mountainous, remote areas where many of these women live. The brochure in Figure 2 highlights the importance of this image of the rugged Appalachian landscape to its organization and operation. The knitting network is flexibly organized to accommodate the geographical barriers that often prevent the members from frequent contact and direct supervision. This flexibility is illustrated in the following quote from some of the network’s literature:

Through efficient telecommunications we can operate over a broad geographical area and provide a quick response to customers. The low fixed costs of operating such a network provide some competitive advantage. Our approach fits a worldwide marketplace that is shifting from mass production to specialized products in niche markets (ABD N.D.).

Much of this network’s flexibility is due to the labor process and particularly the employment of women who work in their homes.

Members of the Appalachian By Design network are self-employed and consequently set their own income goals and work schedules. A few women work full-time in this activity to generate the only household income, but most of the members supplement their household income through knitting (ABD N.D.). The knitters are paid piece rate for their work, earning between $6.75 and $10.00 an hour. Although this income is higher than many minimum wage, service sector jobs in the area, some knitters complain about the relatively low pay, especially during the period when they are beginning to knit or are learning a new technique. One advantage of working at home that translates to savings, however, is the knitters do not have to pay for transportation and other costs associated with working outside the home. In sum, this
Constructing Gender in Home-based Economic Strategies

The construction of gender identities in home-based economic strategies is examined here through an intensive analysis of members of a rural economic network. The discussion examines how gender ideologies shape and are shaped by these household economic strategies. According to Lawson (1995:432), “In order to understand why … homework is predominantly women's work, we must analyze the ways in which patriarchal gender relations are constructed, renegotiated, and transformed through practices and ideologies operating beyond the firm in households and communities.” The contextual dimensions of this research are important because most of the households are in rural areas in a region that is economically underdeveloped. This analysis includes three themes that highlight the cultural construction of gender identities and the implications for both individual and collective strategies. First, as the literature has shown, broad economic processes influence people's decisions to engage in homework. As described above, economic restructuring has shifted employment opportunities in this region as increases in service sector employment outnumber manufacturing and mining jobs. These shifts are couched within dominant gender ideologies of waged work and social reproduction that limit employment options, especially for women. The second theme in this analysis explores the economic impact on and gender divisions of labor within households whose members engage in homework. The analysis highlights the somewhat contentious nature of this form of income generation as individuals struggle to combine domestic and waged labor and households become sites of economic activity.

The third theme in this analysis focuses on the network as a collective economic strategy with particular gendered dimensions and resistance to marginalizing power relations. The discussion specifically refers to ABD, but draws from broader feminist analyses of alternative economic strategies. Throughout the discussion are quotes from women homeworkers who are involved in the knitting network. I examine their experiences and negotiations of gender in the household, the motivation for doing homework, and the economic and social implications for themselves and their families. This approach seeks to present these women not as passive
victims of broader economic processes, but as active participants in their struggle to engage in their own livelihoods.

Before proceeding, a basic profile of the network members is presented to give the reader a more detailed understanding of the socio-economic and demographic background of the knitters. The data in Figure 4 are collected from the network’s annual survey of the members. Out of approximately 60 members, 38 responded for a return rate of 63 percent. Four categories, location, age, income, and education, were selected to depict the background of the knitters. The geographic location of the knitters is largely rural; 19 women (65.5 percent) live in rural areas or towns with less than 2500 people, while only 2 (7 percent) live in towns over 10,000. This closely matches the overall population of the state which is 66 percent rural. Additionally, the greatest proportion of members are 40-49 years old. In general, knitters to be middle aged and out of the childbearing stage of the life cycle. The household income of the knitters varies from below $14,000 (nearly one third of those responding to this question) to over $35,000 (one fifth of these knitters). The median income range of the knitters is in the $22,500 to $28,000 range, slightly higher than the WV average. Finally, the education level is somewhat higher than the state average. In WV, 11% of women had at least a bachelors degree while 23% (8 women) of the knitters had an undergraduate degree and 6% had a graduate degree. Overall, the sample of knitters is comparable to WV women, although slightly better off in regards to income and education. The need for some financial support to purchase the knitting machine, coupled with the ability to meet deadlines and follow through with commitments to the network partly explains the need for a certain level of resources and social capacity.

Weighing employment options

For most homeworkers, domestic responsibilities and the lack of alternative employment opportunities factor into their decision to engage in home-based income-generating activities. These decisions are heavily influenced by the cultural construction of gender and domesticity that relate to the material conditions of households. Similar to women’s experiences in other developing regions, many of the homeworkers are unable to work outside the home because of the shortage of adequate, well-paying jobs in their communities, lack of child or elder care, or other domestic tasks. These limiting factors are sometimes exacerbated in rural areas where transportation costs are relatively high and provision of organized childcare is inadequate. A recent study in West Virginia noted that 16 percent of the state’s counties had no licensed child
care centers and over 70 percent of working parents rely on relatives and friends to care for their children (Bruce et al. 1993). In addition, rural areas tend to have lower economic performance than urban areas in terms of household income and rate of unemployment. In WV, while overall per capita income rose and the number of service jobs increased in the early 1990s, the economic status of the rural central and southern coalfields worsened.

The economic constraints of rural areas are coupled with dominant gender ideologies of home and work that serve to marginalize many women from viable income-generating activities. For many women in rural Appalachia, the only employment opportunities are part-time and low wage service work. One home-based knitter describes her failure to find a satisfactory after moving to rural West Virginia from Alaska where she was vice president in a bank.

I thought I could surely find a job in a bank doing something which would give us the benefit of insurance, which is a major, major problem ... And I went to three banks in this area and the best job offer I got was as a part-time teller.

Another woman who works as a trainer in ABD also lost her job at a local factory before joining the network.

I started working for a production-type plant when I was 18, making curtains and draperies for Sears. I worked for them 18 years. I ran all types of production machinery and was supervisor over quality control. But then the plant closed. So I was out of work. I don’t know if it’s the same everywhere, but this area doesn’t have many jobs. Everyone’s laying people off. I shudder to think what I’d be doing if ABD hadn’t come along. I always said I would hate to go to work at a fast-food restaurant.

Many of the women have had difficulty finding employment in their areas. Women are stuck in female-dominated occupations that are referred to in the statistics above. Many of these jobs do not provide adequate job security or financial benefits. Consequently, women turn to informal labor or seasonal work in low-paying jobs.

Childcare is one option … Most of the childcare they do is after school and before school … which doesn't do a lot. A couple of people in this area I know do take in sewing or things like that. There's a good many of them I think that try and do some craft shows like for the churches, fairs, and things like that. ... there's a girl in Bruceton Mills that literally makes her income by doing a couple of craft shows a year. Yeah, by making stuff and selling it. … In tax season time, there are people that know how to do taxes that will help
the tax preparers. They'll type the stuff up for them. But it's a very limited window of
things. There's not much. Waitressing work in the summertime that you know they can
leave home to do. But there again when the winter comes and the resorts, you know it's
seasonal work.

The economic strategies adopted by this homeworker and others in her area reflect the fluid and
sometimes vulnerable situations in which many women find themselves, especially in rural areas.
Alongside the difficulty of finding secure, well-paying jobs in many of these economically
depressed areas, dominant gender roles and divisions of labor often preclude women from
working outside the home in the formal sector. The flexible nature of home-based work is
significantly influenced by gendered ideologies concerning social relations of production and
reproduction.

Home-based economic activities are conducive to many women’s schedules, especially
those who live in areas with few job opportunities and relatively traditional gender divisions of
labor. Being self-employed and engaged in homework allows many women to accommodate
household demands, yet earn needed incomes. This situation is reflected in the following quote
by Cindy whose family situation dictates that she remain in her home:

Appalachia By Design was just what I needed when I needed it. My son, who has
cerebral palsy, lives with us and he requires constant supervision. My 85-year old
mother-in-law lives with us too. I was feeling like I needed to do something of my own
but it was really almost impossible for me to try to go out and work.

Cindy’s experience illustrates how women are subject to dominant gender ideologies about
women’s domestic responsibilities.

In many of the homeworking examples cited above, traditional divisions of labor translate
into women having more responsibility for domestic tasks and care giving activities, while
formal employment opportunities outside the household are seen as more part of the male
domain (Benton 1990; Oberhauser 1995). The complications of combining formal income-
generation with domestic responsibilities are evident in almost all of the interviews. One woman
had this to say about another knitter who also works for ABD.

Betty is around 30 years old, she's married and has two small children. She was
cleaning houses when we got into this. Her dream is to be able to not have to clean
houses at all anymore. And make enough income to be able to stay home with her
children so when they come home from school she can be there to take care of them. …
Also a lot of the work that is available in these communities is waitressing, which is shift work, cleaning hotel rooms, that's another one they do. The money they make does not allow them to hire help, so they depend on family and friend to babysit. … All of the women in this network got into this because they had a need to be at home and the fact that there is nothing else around here.

In an extensive study of informal labor, Lozano (1989) argues that women are more likely to leave waged employment for self-employment to avoid gender stereotyping and accommodate household responsibilities. Given these constraints, women’s income generating activities are often more flexible in terms of time and workplace in order to accommodate these rigid gender divisions of labor.

_Economic and social impacts of Appalachian By Design_

Participation in a network such as Appalachian By Design is linked to both economic and social conditions that influence multiple dimensions of a knitter’s life. This discussion explores the economic implications and social aspects of this type of homework. The central element of informal, home-based work in many developing regions and Appalachia is the supplementary nature of this income-generating activity, a common characteristic in many of the studies on home-based work discussed above. For example, Benton’s (1990) analysis of women’s industrial homework in Spain revealed that while this type of economic activity is considered to be supplementary income, the women in her study earned on average thirty-nine percent of family income. Likewise, most members of the networks examined in this study do not earn enough to support a household, although a few women in the network are the sole providers for their families. One of these women, Rachel, lives in a rural area and provides the majority of their household income of under $11,000. She and her husband have worked on and off over the past several years due to lack of adequate work and to home school their three children. Their fluctuating work histories reveal the complexity that is often found in middle to low income households in rural Appalachia.

After my husband quit working, he was able to go to school full time. And we do home school. So I was taking care of the (children’s) schooling, and through that time period he was receiving unemployment compensation, … but halfway into his schooling he ran out of weekly income. … So I went to the part-time work, mostly the Dairy Queen. … Then after that they called me for the birthing center, which was a midnight shift from
midnight 'til eight in the morning. Weekends only. Which worked out good ‘cause then he was here with the children and we didn’t have to have any childcare. But as far as the family life it just didn’t work out. That’s when I started exploring other possibilities. It just, kind of, everything fell into place together. … It worked out that that was something we had been praying about for a long time. Was something where I could stay at home. That way I can still handle the school, and work too. You just have to rearrange everything. So that’s what we were looking for was the flexibility to come up with to where Mom could stay at home and if Dad has to he can go out and work.

Rachel is providing nearly 90% of their household income while her husband does odd jobs in the area. Her story reveals the strategies involved in combining several part-time and temporary income sources. The fluidity of work arrangements between Rachel and her husband are centered around the household and particularly the children’s needs. Here, the rural context and social constructions of home and work have shaped their household economic strategies. In general, working at home has been a positive experience for their household.

The interviews and surveys both revealed that most of the knitters’ earnings are supplemental income. Many of the network members knit part time and rely mostly on other sources of income for the majority of household expenses. 68 percent of the knitters indicated that two people contribute to household income and only 29 percent indicated they were the sole source of income. The second income in one third of the former households was social security or other retirement pensions. Earnings from home-based knitting varied greatly among the members (Table 1). 38 percent, or 14 of the 38 knitters responding to the survey contributed less than $5000 to their households in 1997, whereas 11 percent earned over $15,000. Expenditure of these earnings, however, does not vary greatly among the knitters. The majority of knitters indicated they spend their earnings on household expenses such as utility bills, clothing for their children, or household remodeling. Some of the money is reinvested in their business for purchasing new equipment or supplies.

The social impacts from participation in the network are more intangible, but just as important to many of the knitters. Independence, self-motivation, and discipline were several of the terms the participants used in describing the necessary characteristics of a successful knitter. And these traits are missing in some of the knitters who have been trained. Carol, a trouble-shooter and trainer for several years says this about some people’s inability to get their business off the ground.
Some of the people I trained are not self-starters. I don’t think these women know how to make a decision without having to get extra help. I think that the culture that they came from is not conducive to them being independent contractors running their own business. The discipline that it takes and the fact that they have to make a decision, the fact that they have to actually learn to do some things on their own. I don’t think they know where to start.

On the other hand, several of the knitters are very independent and have the drive to succeed. Beth’s family situation necessitates the type of organization that is conducive to this type of work.

I’ve always been kinda self-motivated. I guess with ten children you have to be. We always had to have a strict routine. So there’s always room for different circumstances like ball games, but we had to have a schedule and a routine that had to be adhered to or we’d have chaos. And that takes motivation.

The situation of home-based work also has certain meanings for people outside the household who do not see this type of activity as productive labor. As one women commented:

… because they’re staying at home, because they’re not doing any of that, a good many of their friends or family members look on what they’re doing as kind of a hobby. That is a real detriment with what ABD is trying to accomplish, you know, of producing a professional person. And we frankly have had difficulty getting some of the people out there doing this to look on themselves as professionals and having a job.

Finally, the advantages of earning money often come in more abstract terms such as empowerment and raised self-esteem that have long term and often profound effects on these women. Karen’s feeling about earning money was typical of many of the knitters interviewed.

I hadn’t worked and contributed to the family household income since 1991 when I quit and had kids. … It was really nice to have my money. I was contributing to the family in a way I could sneak some money out without felling guilty. ‘Cause it was money I had earned and I could go out and buy something and I didn’t feel like I had to justify in the budget what I had paid and what I wanted.

Thus, the network provides an important, if intangible benefit to the knitters by giving them a feeling of economic independence that challenges some of the dominant gender ideologies in this a relatively traditional rural context.
Gendering economic networks

While the knitting network has different impacts on the members depending on their motivation and socio-economic status, the gendered nature of this organization is evident in its objectives and operation. One of the objectives of Appalachian By Design is to cultivate a sense of commitment among the members to the organization and encourage their participation in the decision-making process. A prevalent attitude among the knitters is that they are gaining economic independence and can take advantage of opportunities in the network that are unavailable elsewhere in their communities. Some of the knitters view their participation in the network as an opportunity to meet with different sorts of people than they would have otherwise.” One woman commented that she was really lonely in her small town and ABD gave her people to interact with. In general, the knitters value the social aspects of the network that are built around a home-based activity that can otherwise be somewhat isolating.

Appalachian By Design organizes specific activities to facilitate this interaction and involvement of the members in the network. One of the biggest events of the year is an annual meeting that is held in Lewisburg for two days and bring members together to learn new knitting techniques, upgrade their business practices, and socialize. Other means of connecting the network include a quarterly newsletter, a steering committee comprised of selected knitters and staff, and regular training sessions held at different locations around the state.

In contrast to the advantages of joining the network articulated above, the members expressed several negative aspects of home-based work and participating in the network. For example, the deadlines imposed by the network were too much for some of the knitters. Although they only accepted an order when asked, several of them expressed the difficulty in meeting some of the deadlines. For some this meant working at all hours, regardless of other demands. This situation contrasts with most jobs outside the home where once one leaves the workplace, the work stays behind. Other disadvantages identified by the members were the initial cost of the knitting machine. Many of the women do not have the collateral or down payment to invest in a $1500 machine. ABD has attempted to alleviate this problem by renting machines to the knitters or encouraging them to take advantage of loans available through small business programs at the state level.

Finally, differences in commitment and attitude in female-dominated networks such as Appalachian By Design reflect three particular gender dimensions of this type of alternative economic strategy. First, the use of homework and the role of informal networks are found in
many locally embedded women’s networks. ABD has stated that it is working “to develop an industry that fits the lifestyle of many rural Appalachian women.” They do this by building “a culture of respect, openness and participation” (ABD 1999). In response to a question about what ABD provides in the way of a network, several knitters commented on the close relationships they have within the network, describing it as “a small family type of thing.”

Second, studies have shown that the gender of the primary owner of a small business is related to the types and financing of activities often undertaken by homeworkers. For example, a study of home-based businesses in the rural Midwest indicates that women and men-owned businesses differ in firm characteristics, business networks, and means of financing (Carter et al 1992). Production among women-owned small businesses are concentrated in what are seen as their traditional roles in society such as florist shops, restaurants, and beauty shops. While sales in these activities do not generate as much as men-owned firms on average, women-owned businesses are more likely to remain in business than the average U.S. firm (SBA 1996).

A third gendered element of this economic network is the participatory organization of production. Many female-dominated networks and other cooperative economic activities are based on participation and interaction among the members and network staff. Some of this is done in the decision-making arena or by opening up the advisory capacity of the organization. Members of the network are encouraged to share in the organization's governance through participation in the steering committee. This is intended to give members more ownership and feel responsible for the network. Another part of the participatory approach of this organization is at the level of production. If members have specific problems with their knitting, a person called a troubleshooter is available to assist. This person will either go to the member’s home or talk through the problem on the telephone. In all of these networks, the financial assistance, training, and professional opportunities provided for these women is achieved in a non-hierarchical and supportive fashion that helps to empower the members in other areas of their lives. Some of these differences can be attributed to typically feminist organizational styles such as an approach to decision-making and authority that is based on consensus. In the case of ABD, both the philosophy and operation take place in a way that emphasizes sensitivity to the members’ needs, participation, and community development.
Conclusion

Increased entrepreneurship among women has gained the attention of feminist scholars in their attempt to understand the social, economic, and political implications of self-employment, homework, and collective economic activities. This research contributes to feminist literature on home-based work and collective economic activities by focusing on the construction of gender ideologies in this sometimes contested form of income-generation. These alternative economic activities reinforce certain gender identities, yet in many instances are vital income-generating strategies. The discussion draws from poststructuralism and Third World feminism to examine the multiple representations of these culturally-embedded economic practices and the critical role of gender relations in the transformation of household economies. Gender ideologies and identities are contextualized in particular social locations of workers and dominant cultural relations. This study focuses on women's homework and the gendering of networks that are vital to many alternative economic activities. Analyses of home-based work in the Third Italy, Spain, and peripheral regions of the Third World provide important examples of how women provide a relatively cheap and flexible source of labor. In addition, this discussion highlights how this type of work is often dependent on social networks such as kinship and community-based relations that are highly gendered in nature.

The knitting network Appalachian By Design illustrates the intersection of gender relations and household production in a flexible manufacturing network. Some differences, but also some important similarities exist between this network and other flexible networks mentioned in the literature. The case study network is a non-profit organization whose objective is to provide employment opportunities for rural women. They highlight their efforts to provide community-based economic development, especially among women, in a region that has suffered tremendously from industrial restructuring in recent decades. Directors of the network recognize the barriers to formal jobs in this geographical context and have adopted their organization to incorporate the flexible nature of women’s lives. This situation leads to a particular intersection reinforcing, yet resisting the dominant gender ideologies of home and work. In this Appalachian network, the roles of women in the domestic sphere and other barriers to formal employment contributed to their decision to join this network. By engaging in income generating activities, however, they challenged dominant notions of the home as a space of reproduction and non-waged labor.
Important comparisons can be made between the experience of homeworkers involved in the network highlighted above and these types of networks and informal economic activities generally referred to in feminist literature. Similar to the many of the networks described above, this Appalachian network is highly embedded in the local socio-economic and political context. Local customs and institutions shape their operation and membership in ways outlined above. Similarities also exist in that they are based on important human interaction exemplified by high levels of cooperation, trust, and reciprocity among members. Several important differences exist, however, in the types of economic networks analyzed here and those generally examined in the literature, especially those involving industrial homework. The gendered nature of home-based work and regional economic networks play a role in an organization's ability to generate rural economic development and provide economic opportunities for women. The participatory and consensus-based nature of the organization outlined here and its decision-making processes reinforce this dimension of alternative economic strategies. Dependence on home-based work, however, coincides with many women’s traditional roles in the domestic sphere. Thus, while depicting some elements of women’s marginalization in flexible production networks, this example from rural Appalachia sheds light on how the organization of a female-dominated economic network can contribute to viable economic development, but also reinforce dominant gender identities in households, communities, and regions.
References


________. N.D. Brochure. Lewisburg, WV: ABD.


Table 1. Earnings from Homework of Appalachian By Design Knitters, 1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Annual Earnings from Homework</th>
<th>Knitters (#)</th>
<th>Knitters (%)</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>&gt; $15,000</td>
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</table>

Source: ABD annual survey of knitters, 1998
Figure 2. Location of Appalachian by Design Members

Source: Appalachian by Design, 1998
Figure 4. Profile of ABD Knitters, 1998

Source: Appalachian By Design, Inc. Network Member Survey, 1998

1 Annual Household Income
Figure 2. Proportion of Women in Major Industry Groups
WV and US as of 1993

Source: WV Bureau of Employment Programs, 1993