

# Black Women in the United States and Unpaid Collective Work: Theorizing the Community as a Site of Production

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## Abstract

This analysis discusses the lived experiences of Black American women as the basis for a new theoretical framework for understanding women’s unpaid work. Feminist economists have called attention to the invisibility of women’s unpaid work within the private household but have not adequately considered the unpaid, nonmarket work that women perform collectively to address urgent community needs that arise out of racial and ethnic group disparities. As such, racialized women’s unpaid, nonmarket work continues to be subject to invisibility. This analysis reconceptualizes Black women’s community activism as unpaid, nonmarket “work” and illustrates that the community is a primary site of nonmarket production by Black women and other racialized women. The community is an important site where racialized women perform unpaid, nonmarket collective work to improve the welfare of community members and address community needs not met by the public and private sectors. The analysis elevates the community to a site of production on par with the household, thereby calling for a paradigm shift in feminist economic conceptualizations of unpaid work. This new framework enables us to examine intersectional linkages across different sites of production—firms, households, and communities—where multiple forms of oppression operate in structuring peoples’ lives. Compared with additive models of gender and race, this intersectional approach more fully captures the magnitude of racialized women’s oppression.

## Keywords

African American women, unpaid work, community work

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## Introduction

This article proposes a new framework for understanding women's unpaid, nonmarket work by discussing the unpaid collective work that Black women perform for their communities. This analysis aims to provide a foundation for further study that generates a deeper and fuller analysis of women's unpaid collective work by stimulating additional thought and research on the subject. As such, it develops a framework that takes the lived experiences of Black women in the United States as its starting point. In the United States, Black women and other racialized women have always engaged in collective unpaid work through their social activism against racial injustice.<sup>1</sup> For racialized women, the struggle against racial injustice often overlaps with and is inseparable from gender and class-based disparities.

White women's identity as women, however, is generally not shaped by racial injustice and so they have developed feminist theories of women's unpaid work that are more attuned to the lived experiences of White women rather than the unpaid work of racialized women. White women's experiences with gender oppression within their homes have shaped their political consciousness about gender oppression, and this has led them to develop theories of women's oppression that emphasize private sphere issues between men and women (Hurtado, 1996). Racialized women's membership in racially oppressed communities, however, both shapes their identities as women and provides them with a sense of shared responsibility to a community that exists beyond the private household sphere. Black women's community activism, according to McDonald (1997) is "born from a conscious, collective need to resist racist and sexist oppression, [and] is one passed down for many generations by their Black activist foremothers" (p. 774).

Despite Black women's long activist tradition of performing unpaid work for their communities, Black women's work has suffered from invisibility because they perform it outside of markets and because Black women often are overlooked as historical subjects, particularly within the discipline of economics.<sup>2</sup> This article, therefore, seeks to develop a broader economic framework for understanding women's unpaid work by placing Black women's experiences at the center of analysis. There are three objectives in this reformulation of women's unpaid work. The first objective is to reconceptualize Black women's *community activism* as unpaid, nonmarket "work." I define "work" as those activities that produce and reproduce material life.<sup>3</sup> The second objective is to illustrate that the community is a primary site of nonmarket production by Black women and other racialized women. Accordingly, the third objective is to place the community as a site of unpaid production on equal footing with the household as a site of production, thereby leading to a paradigm shift in feminist economic conceptualizations of unpaid work.

## Organization of Economic Activity

This section provides a schematic of the main ways in which economic activities are organized: through the market economy, state economy, household economy, and

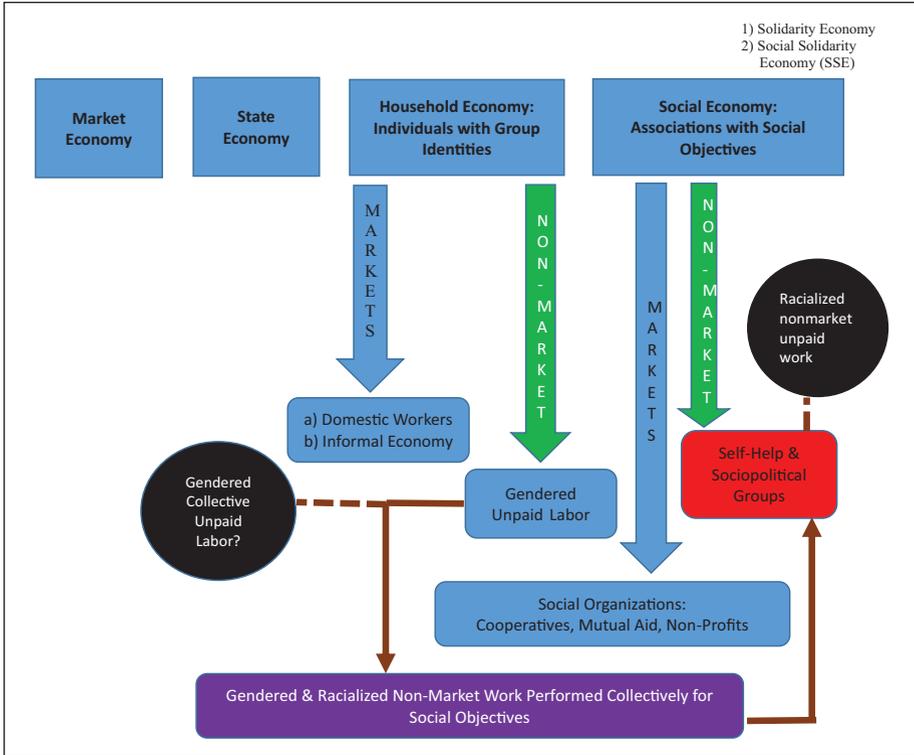


Chart I. Ways to organize economic activity.

social economy. It discusses both market and nonmarket production of goods and services within households and the social economy and draws attention to the omission of collective unpaid work that racialized women perform.

Flowchart 1 displays the various ways in which people organize economic activities in the United States. Economic activities of production and consumption or provisioning occur through the market, the state, the household, or the social economy (Wright, 2010).<sup>4</sup> Neoclassical economists primarily focus on some combination of the first two ways: the market and the state. In their formulation, production/consumption and buying/selling of goods and services takes place within the market economy or through state provision of goods and services. Within neoclassical theory, the household consumes goods and services and supplies labor to firms. The neoclassical approach to understanding economic activities through markets and state production needs no additional elaboration because it is the main economic approach taught in most universities.

Feminist economists generally focus their analysis on economic activities involving the household, state, and market. Women engage in paid labor through state and market transactions and receive services through state provisioning. When feminist

economists examine unpaid work, they primarily center their analysis on the household. Compared with the neoclassical approach, feminist theorists have broadened the understanding of economic activities by arguing that the household is not just a place of consumption but also a site of production that involves *unpaid* labor (Ferguson & Folbre, 1981). Within the household, there is a gendered division of labor with women and girls often producing particular goods and services such as caregiving, cooking, and cleaning for other household members. This production is uncompensated. Accordingly, this production does not involve markets because there are no buying and selling activities. The green arrows in the chart signify nonmarket production of goods and services.

Nonetheless, the household sometimes participates in markets as a site of production. It does so when household members employ domestic workers to produce goods and services in exchange for a wage. The household also participates in markets as a site of production when household members produce goods and services that they sell from home.<sup>5</sup>

Some heterodox economists focus on a fourth way of producing goods and services: through the social economy or similar frameworks of Solidarity or Social Solidarity Economy.<sup>6</sup> The social economy consists of work that people perform for social objectives rather than for profit. Social economy activities often provide for pressing community needs that the private market sector and the state fail to meet (Quarter & Mook, 2010). These voluntary associations have members who collectively produce goods and services to provide for human needs (Wright, 2010). Work within the social economy, therefore, pulls people together for social objectives such as generating jobs for community members.

Voluntary associations that serve collective community needs can be formal, registered organizations such as cooperatives and nonprofit foundations whose activities are channeled through factor and product markets (Monzon & Chaves, 2008; Poole & Kumar, 2012). They also can be nonregistered, self-help, and sociopolitical groups that consist of people who organize around common interests (Quarter & Mook, 2010). An example of this would be a group of people who come together based on the need for fresh produce within their community. Indeed, people are likely to undertake social economy efforts during periods of crisis when the private and public sectors each fail to provide sufficiently for human needs (Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005, p. 2041). While some nonregistered, self-help groups participate in market transactions within the informal economy, others do not engage in market transactions.

This latter part of the social economy framework (the red area) of informal self-help groups without market transactions has not received as much analysis as social economy *organizations* that involve market transactions—that have paid workers and/or produce goods/services sold through markets. Registered social economy organizations such as cooperatives and nonprofits have wage, labor hours, and sales data that agencies and researchers can collect for analysis. The pioneering work of Black scholars, including Stewart (1984), Haynes (1993), and Gordon Nembhard (2014) in uncovering and documenting the cooperative tradition among African Americans, is within this category. Similarly, the foundational research of Hossein (2017) that has named

and explored work within the Black social economy consists primarily of organizations whose members engage in market transactions. Informal, self-help, and sociopolitical groups, however, generally do not have paid workers or market transactions of goods and services.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the unpaid, collective production of goods and services within self-help and sociopolitical groups is undertheorized within the social economy framework.

Similarly, feminist household frameworks for understanding unpaid work do not focus sufficient attention on work that women perform collectively that does not involve market transactions. When feminists discuss women's unpaid volunteer work, the focus is on the ways in which unpaid volunteer work adds to women's overall work burden as members of households. The household, therefore, is the central or primary unit of analysis. The result is that neither feminist household nor social economy theories devote sufficient attention to the nonmarket unpaid work that racialized women perform through collective action to protest injustice, secure resources, and resist marginalization for their communities. However, Black women and other racialized women in the United States have always performed unpaid sociopolitical collective work. They have done so because their communities have always lacked sufficient access to public and private sector resources and because the public and private sectors have engaged in actions that threaten the safety and welfare of community members through environmental hazards and state-sanctioned violence.

The social economy and household frameworks do not capture the important collective unpaid work that racialized women disproportionately perform to challenge inequities and protect their communities. The Black areas of the chart indicate areas that are undertheorized within both the feminist household and social economy theoretical approaches: nonmarket, unpaid self-help/sociopolitical work of racialized women in the social economy approach and the collective, nonmarket work of racialized women in the household approach. Taken together, the purple area shows the overall theoretical omission with respect to race, gender, and collective work missing from both approaches.<sup>8</sup>

## **Unpaid Collective Community Work**

We must focus on women's collective community work because of the role that the community occupies in the lives of racially marginalized groups through their emotional and physical attachments to it. Members of racially oppressed groups may reside within shared residential locations or they may live outside of racially segregated areas but still identify as belonging to a racialized community. In explaining the significance of the construct of the community to politics, P. H. Collins (2010, p 15) argues that less powerful peoples' "group-based ethos" and lived experiences inform their grassroots political actions. P. H. Collins (2010) adds that the "ethos lie in addressing social problems that affect the group by seeing the group as a community that, because it is harmed collectively, is best helped through collective response" (p. 16). This explains why Black women continue to engage in community work even when they no longer live within racially segregated neighborhoods. Garber (1995, p. 24), in discussing the

overlap between place and identity, describes women's involvement in community action as "communities of purpose" because women's shared circumstances lead them to engage in local political action. This notion of community does not necessarily imply women's shared physical location because their sense of community develops out of common lived experiences. Nonetheless, women's political actions often arise out of their collective concerns over place when it intersects with the belief that their wellbeing is connected to others who share the same race, ethnicity, or class position (Garber, 1995, pp. 34, 40). Indeed, Black women's activism derives from both place and group identity stemming from their lived experiences with racial, gender, and class-based oppression.

Placing Black women at the center of analysis of unpaid work reveals that, due to racial exclusion and segregation, they have long participated in the social economy for the social objectives of providing community assistance and community revitalization. Rodriguez (1998) explains the importance of Black women's community work by noting, "From the enslavement period to contemporary times, African American women's resistance has been a necessary aspect of survival not only for the women themselves but for the entire Black community" (p. 95). During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Black women's self-help activities included the creation of cooperative associations, fraternal orders, and benefit associations that provided needed services to Black community members. For example, middle-class Black women created the Atlanta Neighborhood Union in 1908 to collect data on community needs so that they could address problems of urban life that White city officials neglected for its Black residents: health services, day care, housing, recreation, and education (Scott, 1990). This is just one of the hundreds of associations that Black women formed and collectively operated throughout the country that provided vital services to community members.<sup>9</sup>

Since the early 20th century, Black women have continued to engage in community work and have done so to a greater degree than Black men (Gilkes, 1988). Indeed, gender affects the ways in which men and women become involved in community politics. Women often engage in community work on behalf of children and, because of this, are more active in community "politics" than men are (Kim, 2013). Black women have been so consistently engaged in community welfare efforts that Rodriguez (1998) characterizes Black women as having an "unrelenting sense of commitment to social and political change" (p. 95).<sup>10</sup> Despite the importance that Black women have placed on performing unpaid work for their communities, their work is often unheralded. In 1924, W.E.B. DuBois noted that Black women's community work received little attention even though he viewed it as the most effective work in the nation that provided social uplift for the vulnerable.<sup>11</sup>

Black women engage in community work to challenge racial disparities that affect the wellbeing of their communities. When Black women organize alongside of each other within groups that address private and public sector actions, they often engage in collective action and work. Collective action involves people coming together to tackle problems of shared interest (Coppock & Desta, 2013). Black women place demands on the state to provide needed resources and services for Black communities

(Rabrenovic, 1995). Black women also come together as members of groups to provide resources for their communities themselves. A few examples of Black women's diverse and long tradition of performing unpaid, nonmarket community activist work include African American women during the Great Depression who organized the Housewives' League of Detroit. The Housewives' League was a campaign to support Black businesses to achieve economic growth and employment by keeping money circulating within Black communities (Jones, 1985). The Housewives League began in Detroit but grew to become a national campaign run entirely by volunteers in more than 25 cities (Barnes, 2013). Professional African American women formed the Women's Political Council in 1946 and worked to increase voter registration, lobby public officials into taking action against racial discrimination on segregated buses, publicize and launch the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955, and sustain it by organizing car pools (Bain, 2017; Norwood, 2020).

In 1963, Johnnie Tillmon and other mothers within her housing project formed Aid to Needy Children—Mothers Anonymous (ANC-Mothers Anonymous) in Watts, Los Angeles. The group worked to engage and train welfare moms in civil rights activism, in welfare disputes and difficulties, and in challenging evictions and aid removals (White, 1999). Black women engaged in grassroots volunteer community activist work to decrease high Black infant and maternal mortality rates through the Birthing Project, established in 1988 (McDonald, 1997). Black women worked to address public housing living conditions and promote antidiscrimination business practices in Tampa, Florida (Rodriguez, 1998). They worked to prevent the construction of an incinerator in the largest African American community in Los Angeles, California, through the formation of Concerned Citizens of South Central LA in 1985.<sup>12</sup> In recent decades, Black women have been especially prominent as both leaders and activists in the environmental and food justice movements. Cheryl Johnson, referred to as the Mother of the Environmental Justice Movement, started a community activist group called People for Community Recovery in 1979 in Chicago, Illinois, in response to quality of life concerns over deteriorating housing in her community and later over high cancer rates within the community due to toxic land contamination and industrial pollution (Holmström, 2018). These are but a few examples in Black women's unbroken tradition of working together to challenge racial injustice through unpaid labor.

Nonetheless, despite the work that goes into performing community activism, the tendency has been to view Black women's community activism against racial injustice primarily as *political* rather than as economic. This has resulted in overlooking Black women's activism as actual "work" that maintains and reproduces material life. Gilkes (2001), however, has notably described Black women's community activism as "work" by stating that African American women's community work is a process that re-creates and sustains their communities while providing resistance to the dominant society. Despite Gilkes and others' recognition that community activism is unpaid "work," it has not been *theorized* as such within an intersectional feminist political economy framework.<sup>13</sup> Yet, Black women's activism involves actual work in addition to politics: nonmarket, unpaid work that takes place within the community—not within a household nor within a firm.

The unpaid work that goes into collective action/community activism against racial disparities varies depending on the issue around which women organize. This unpaid work may involve collecting information from community members, organizing meetings, making phone calls to media and elected officials, writing letters and op-eds, publicizing issues, organizing car pools, organizing petition drives, negotiating with public and corporate officials, cleaning garbage from neighborhoods, organizing community patrols, planting seeds and developing community gardens, transporting people to sites of protest or service, registering community members, running awareness campaigns, constructing buildings, monitoring community health, meeting public officials, and cooking food and serving it to community members.

Similar to the argument that feminists have made with respect to unpaid household production, if these *community* activities were channeled through the market—if other people were paid to do them—they would be counted as “work” and their value included as part of national income accounting (Waring, 1988). These nonmarket community actions involve the production of goods and services that women undertake to achieve social objectives. Community members receive collective benefits from the results of the unpaid work of women activists.

Although this analysis has centered on the experiences of Black American women’s performance of unpaid, nonmarket work, it is generalizable to other racialized women within the United States and in countries outside of the United States where women collectively challenge group disparities at the community level.<sup>14</sup> Indigenous women in the United States have been active in challenging environmental contaminations to their lands and communities for generations. The Women of All Red Nations (WARN) was an activist group of women from more than 30 indigenous nations that raised awareness of and provided resistance to uranium mining, forced sterilizations, and child removal practices (<https://www.womenofallrednations.org/>). Indigenous women have been leaders in efforts to block construction of oil pipelines that violate sovereignty treaties, desecrate reservation lands, and undermine the safety of local drinking water (Lyons, 2017). The communities’ beliefs about and spiritual connection to land and water have also motivated women’s collective actions. Indigenous women’s activism to prevent the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline in Standing Rock, North Dakota, is a recent example of women’s unpaid, nonmarket work through collective action.

Mexican American women have mobilized as a collective force within their communities in social justice campaigns dealing with toxic waste, prisons, policing, jobs, educational facilities, and recreation centers. In her case study of women in Los Angeles communities, Pardo (1998) notes that although Mexican American women’s grassroots activism plays a central role in mobilizing community resources that affect the quality of life within the community, their efforts are overlooked and become “unrecorded politics” (p. 5). She documents the long history of women’s community activism in Los Angeles and focuses on Mothers of East Los Angeles whose unpaid activist work defeated the construction of a prison and a toxic waste incinerator within their community. Offshoots of the group raised funds to reinvest in the community while also addressing community problems of lead poisoning, access to jobs, and

water conservation. As with Black and Native women, Mexican American women collectively perform unpaid work with the goal of improving the welfare of community members. Similarly, as Pardo notes about Mexican American women's community work, Black and Native women's unpaid community work is also "unrecorded." Although racialized communities are aware that women perform community work, there are little data on the unpaid work that women collectively perform. This analysis argues for the necessity of both seeing and documenting women's unpaid collective community work.

Outside of the United States, racialized and other marginalized women organize collectively at the community level to challenge group disparities and provide for unmet community needs. In response to inadequate financial services provided by state and private banks, Hossein (2013) states that poor women in low-income Caribbean countries provide services to community members through informal banking systems that draw on traditional African lending practices of pooling resources. In so doing, these women prioritize social relations among people over impersonal market relations in decisions over credit worthiness (Hossein, 2013, p. 424). Hossein's research discusses the ways in which poor women in Jamaica, Guyana, and Haiti have responded to the financial needs of Black community members who lack access to credit through the formal, commercial, and state lending apparatus. These women create rotating credit and savings associations (ROCSAs) that enable women to contribute to a common account, and when their turn arrives, they are able to receive pooled money from it. Although some ROCSAs charge small lending fees, those that do not are engaging in collective forms of self-help that are unpaid and nonmarket. Hossein (2018) aptly describes their activities as not only providing financial coping tools for community members but also engaging in a "form of politics of resistance" (p. 81).

Throughout the world, women engage in a politics of resistance through informal self-help and activist groups by working collectively without pay for the benefit of their communities. These collective work activities include indigenous Kenyan women in the Rendille community who formed groups and engaged in activities to protect their land against outside investors and to educate members on land conservation and women's rights (UN Women, 2018, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/4/from-where-i-stand-alice-lesepen>). It occurs in India when Dalit women organize at the grassroots level to protest their marginalization and form groups to develop ways to empower women (Govinda, 2006). It occurs in Brazil when Munduruku women activists organize campaigns against the infringement of the Tapajós River basin by loggers, dam builders, and miners (Watts, 2019). To reiterate, the collective informal and activist activities that women engage in around the world constitute unpaid work not channeled through markets. Nonetheless, the four main models of economic activities do not theorize these women's community-based efforts as *work* activities.

## The Community as a Site of Production

This section illustrates the importance of incorporating racialized women's unpaid, nonmarket work into an analysis of economic activities. It draws on several different

theories of oppression that focus on the reproduction and maintenance of inequalities. It problematizes the emphasis feminists place on the household in women's performance of unpaid labor and argues for the elevation of the community as a nonmarket site of production. Chart 2 provides a new framework for illustrating the ways in which sites of oppression interact. The chart incorporates elements from Marxian theory, heterodox economics, feminist economics, and intersectional feminism. The framework shows the ways in which Black women experience multiple, simultaneous forms of oppression—exploitation, dominance, and exclusion—based on gender, race, and class processes at different sites of production.<sup>15</sup>

### *Sites of Production*

According to Wolff and Resnick (1987), in Marxian theory, a “site” refers to a place in society where various processes and social relationships occur. These processes and relations are subject to change because they are “overdetermined” by being constituted by many elements, some of which are contradictory. Although there are no fixed distinctions among sites and some of the same processes may occur within different sites, a site can generally be defined as a “loci” of specific subsets of social processes and relations (Wolff & Resnick, 1987, p. 219). The firm, for example, involves relations between business owners and workers and is a site where goods and services are produced and sold through markets.<sup>16</sup> The firm, therefore, is a primary site of production. It is a location where employers exploit workers by not compensating them for their full output. Stated differently, business owners appropriate the surplus labor that workers produce and this constitutes exploitation.

Feminist economists have argued that, similar to the firm, the household is a site of production. Unlike the firm, household production of goods and services is for use within households rather than for sale through markets. Feminists examine the amount of unpaid labor women and men perform within and around households as well as the gendered division of labor between household couples.<sup>17</sup> Socialist feminists draw parallels with Marxian analysis by examining the ways in which men, as a class, exploit women by appropriating the fruits of their surplus production within households (Hartmann, 1981). In addition, feminist theorists recognize the ways in which unpaid labor within the private household reinforces and reflects women's subordination outside of it. When feminist economists examine linkages between unpaid household work and work performed elsewhere, they usually focus on paid work within firms or women's work within the informal economy.

To the extent that the community enters into feminist economic analysis of women's unpaid labor, it does so primarily through an individual householder's volunteer efforts to a community organization. The volunteer work is often considered in terms of how it adds to women's overall work burden as members of *households* (Hook, 2004). Therefore, for many feminists, the household is the primary site of production where women experience exploitation through unpaid work that benefits men. This, however, is theorizing from the perspective of White women's lived experiences.

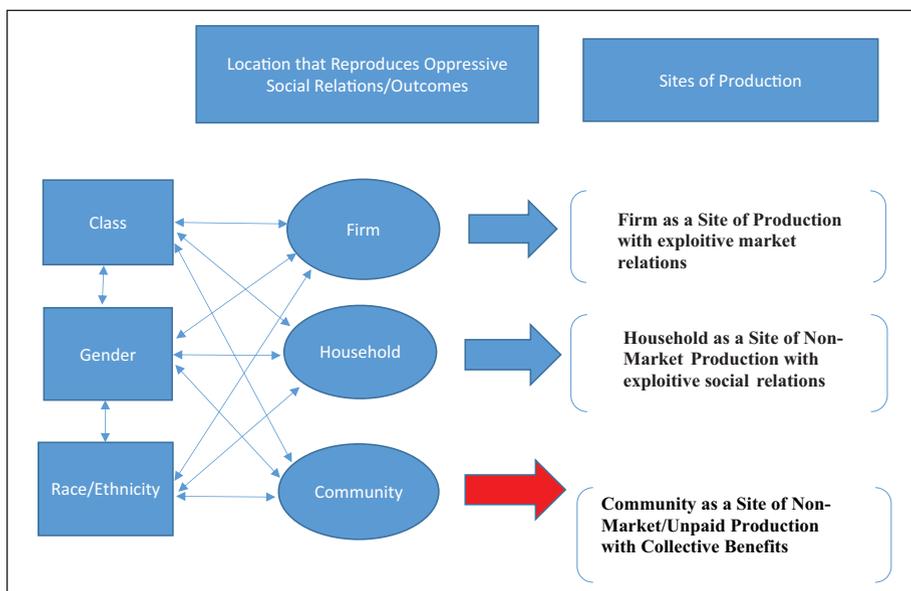
As discussed in the previous section, for racialized women, the community is also a primary site of production with unpaid labor. Membership in racially oppressed communities informs racialized women's gender identities and experiences. Although the wellbeing of household members may motivate racialized women's actions, their emotional ties to their *communities* also prompt collective community work. African American activist Tamika Mallory expressed this sentiment when she said, "Women are the protectors. We carry the weight of the entire community on our backs" (Whack, 2017). As such, a more accurate framework for understanding women's work is one that incorporates their economic activities—both paid and unpaid—within *multiple* sites of production: the firm, household, and the community.

### *Sites of Oppression*

In heterodox economics, sites of oppression refer to locations that reproduce oppressive social relations and inequitable group outcomes. In Albelda et al.'s (2001) formulation, the firm, household, and community are locations/sites where oppressive social relations and outcomes between three counterpart groups occur and reproduce over time. The counterpart groups are (a) business owners versus workers (b) men versus women, and (c) Whites versus Blacks. Class, gender, and racial processes facilitate these oppressive social relations and disparate outcomes between counterpart groups. Class relations and processes involve the production, appropriation, and distribution of goods and services (or surplus labor within Marxian economics). Gender refers to socially defined differences attributed to males and females. Race refers to presumed biological and behavioral differences between groups of people. As with gender, race is a cultural process involving ideology that uses socially defined genetic and physical differences to *create* population groupings. Racial categories have particular meanings attached to them that are always subject to change. Although gender and race are social constructs without a biological basis, they serve the interests of dominant counterpart groups by rationalizing, sanctioning, and enabling disparate treatment and the development of hierarchies based on ascriptive characteristics. Therefore, gender and racial beliefs, along with class processes, affect material outcomes that persist across generations.

Furthermore, social relations between these counterpart groups may involve three forms of oppression: dominance, exploitation, or exclusion. Albelda et al. (2001, pp. 114–116) define dominance as relations of coercion and submission, exploitation as control over another group's work for material or monetary gain, and exclusion as physical or social isolation of another group to limit their roles and opportunities. In their analysis, the firm is the primary site of oppression where business owners exploit workers and the household is a primary site of oppression where men have dominance over women. The community is the primary site of oppression where Whites carry out racial oppression through a process of geographic segregation (p. 113). Communities, therefore, represent sites where dominant groups use exclusion and violence to maintain and reproduce racial and ethnic disparities (P. H. Collins, 2010).

## A New Framework: Firm, Household, and Community as Sites of Production



**Chart 2.** Heterodox economics sites of oppression.

In Chart 2, we can see the interaction of three different sites of production where goods/services are produced. Unlike the Marxian and Feminist approaches, which emphasize production within the firm and/or household, this approach elevates the community to a primary site of nonmarket production of goods and services based on racialized women's unpaid labor. This framework is inclusive of racialized women's experiences because the community is *especially* operative in reproducing oppressive social relations and outcomes.

Moreover, the elevation of the community to a site of production on par with that of the firm and the household enables us to take an intersectional feminist look at women's production of goods and services, both paid and unpaid. This framework allows us to examine women's production of goods and services at the individual level within households and at the collective level within communities. The interaction of gender, race, and class processes within each of these three locations—as indicated by the thin blue arrows—reinforces and magnifies Black women and other racialized women's oppression. Gender, race, and class processes occur within each site/location (firm, household, and community) that reproduces oppressive relations and outcomes. The arrows coming from gender, race, and class processes indicate simultaneous influences because gender, race, and class are overlapping categories. Furthermore, the arrows show influences in both directions such that the interactive effects of gender, race, and class processes within each of these locations affect gender, race, and class meanings

outside of these sites. This framework is useful in thinking through ways in which racialized women experience multiple, interactive forms of oppression—exploitation, domination, and exclusion *differently*, depending on the site and on the racial-ethnic group in question. Social relations embedded within each of these locations affect relative group positions and outcomes.

We can illustrate the interactive effects of gender, race, and class processes along with different forms of oppression within each site. Within the firm, Black women experience exploitation (a class process) as workers by their employers. Exploitation occurs when business owners are able to appropriate and distribute the surplus labor that Black women workers produce. Employers also exercise dominance within the workplace by having control over the labor process. The gender wage gap and racial wage gap that Black women experience compared with comparable White workers (White men and White women, respectively) indicate that employers' control over the labor process enables them to extract more surplus from Black women, on average. Employers' exclusion of Black women from higher paid, higher status jobs benefits their racial and gender counterpart groups by enabling White women and White men to have favorable access to jobs and pay. The interaction of these processes makes Black women especially vulnerable to workplace dominance and exploitation.

Gender, race, and class processes also affect social relations and outcomes within households. Some processes may lead to contradictory effects. Black women, like other women who perform unpaid household work that others appropriate, experience exploitation within their households. However, compared with other women in the United States, Black women on average perform less unpaid core household work (cooking and cleaning), whereas Black men on average perform similar amounts as other men (Sayer & Fine, 2011). This difference indicates that Black women are less likely to define their gender around performance of household work compared with other women (Sayer & Fine, 2011). In addition, we can see an interactive effect from the site of the firm due to Black women and men's low wages. Black women have a higher gender earnings ratio with Black men compared with White women and White men. As a result, it may enable Black women to have more bargaining/decision-making power and experience less dominance from men within their households. Black women's exclusion from steady and well-paid jobs, however, undermines the wellbeing of Black household members by increasing their precarity. Unlike most White women in the United States, Black women have always had to work outside of their households for pay. White racial views of Black women as workers rather than as mothers with caregiving needs at home have reinforced this pattern.<sup>18</sup>

Historically, Black women's exclusion from jobs within firms meant that they have disproportionately worked as low-wage domestic workers in White households. Within this context, White households become sites of production with market relations and White householders become employers who exploit Black women by appropriating and distributing the surplus labor that they produce. Social relations between Blacks and Whites based on White racial dominance help to perpetuate the expectation of servile work attitudes and social distance between Black domestic workers and White bosses. Black women's performance of gendered work involving child care and cleaning benefits White women because it enables them to have time to pursue paid

work and other activities.<sup>19</sup> This means that White women—like White men—are able to participate in market relations within firms because Black women perform household care responsibilities. Accordingly, White women have a material interest in maintaining White patriarchy as a system of control over racialized women's labor power. White women have a material interest in maintaining racialized women's exclusion from better-paid jobs within firms.

At the community site, Blacks live in racially isolated and segregated areas due to racial residential and financial exclusions. Black communities experience dominance by both the private and public sectors through their adverse actions and their control over decisions that affect the wellbeing of community members. This includes, for example, the ways in which Black segregated communities struggle with the unequal distribution of environmental burdens and unequal access to vital resources and services. These racial disparities prompt Black women to perform collective unpaid work to improve social welfare. Their unpaid collective production leads to collective community appropriation and benefits that may include collective goods such as clean air and water, safer neighborhoods, and racial justice. As such, their collective production and collective appropriation (a class process) does not result in exploitation by community members.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, due to gender norms, Black women disproportionately carry the burdens of collective work. They are also increasingly bearing the cost of social reproduction, given the reduced spending by the state on social welfare resources needed by the community and given the low wages paid by employers to Black workers. In both cases, the state and the firm have externalized the costs of social reproduction onto Black women. This represents higher profits for firms and increased savings by the state. Finally, the state exercises dominance and control over Black women activists and community members through policing. The criminalization of Black women results in felony convictions that provide high profits to firms that use extremely low-wage, coerced prison labor.<sup>21</sup>

This framework is a starting point for developing a more accurate account of economic activities that include the unpaid work that racialized women perform for their communities.<sup>22</sup> It bridges the analytical gaps within economic theories with respect to nonmarket, unpaid work women perform collectively. This framework enables us to examine intersectional linkages across different sites of production where multiple, intersecting forms of oppression operate in structuring peoples' lives through overlapping race, gender, and class processes. This approach is preferable to simple additive models of gender and race that do not fully capture the magnitude of racialized women's oppression. Elevating the community to a site of production on par with the firm and household allows us to examine the microeconomic and macroeconomic impacts of economic changes on women's work. During periods of severe economic crisis or natural disasters or public health crises, women's unpaid community work increases in response to loss of jobs and services; this framework captures systemic effects on communities.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding women's work experiences requires a paradigm shift in our conceptualization of women's unpaid work that moves us beyond a narrow focus on relations

between men and women within private households to one that expands our focus to include the unpaid work of women whose collective activism challenges racial, ethnic, national, caste, and class-based injustices. Women's unpaid community work is often linked to factors that affect their paid and unpaid work within firms and households. As Neysmith et al. (2012) state, "The contradictions in women's lives remain hidden when theory, research, and policy reinforce the separation of the worlds of employment, community, and domestic labour from one another" (p. 3). We can analyze contradictions and complementary processes of gender, race, class, caste, and citizenship status only when we have a theoretical framework that encompasses the interactive effects of these sites of production, particularly within the context of state policies. Although this analysis has focused on Black American women's unpaid collective work, it is applicable to racialized and marginalized women who live in oppressed communities throughout the world.

Feminists have articulated the need to make visible, to quantify, and to assign value to the nonmarket work that women perform within the household. This logic must extend to the site of the community where racialized and marginalized women often perform unpaid, nonmarket work because their communities lack sufficient access to public and private sector resources and because of actions taken by the public and private sectors that threaten the wellbeing and safety of community members. This represents an unjust work burden not just of gender but also of race-ethnicity and social class/caste. Making women's collective nonmarket work visible enables us to theorize women's oppression and exploitation in a manner that is inclusive of the lives of racialized women. It allows us to more fully and carefully theorize social relations within and across the different sites of production or sectors of the economy and to have a better sense of the amount and type of work that people actually perform. Finally, this framework calls for the need to think through the impact of macroeconomic policies not only in terms of their gender effects but also on their racial-ethnic effects.

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### **Notes**

1. This article does not explore other forms of unpaid labor, such as individual volunteer work, that Black women perform for their communities that have social objectives because

the focus here is on production that Black women perform *collectively*. Nonetheless, Black women and other racialized women's unpaid volunteer work is an understudied subject relative to the volunteer work of White women in the United States.

2. The discipline of economics lags behind other disciplines with respect to understanding African American and other racialized women's work, both paid and unpaid. There is greater discussion of racialized women's community activism and work within the disciplines of political science and urban/community sociology and feminist geography. See, for example, Nadia Kim, "Citizenship on the Margins: A Critique of Scholarship on Marginalized Women and Community Activism," *Sociology Compass* 7/6 (2013): 459–470.
3. This definition of work is an adaptation from Marilyn Power's (2004) concept of social provisioning.
4. This formulation of ways of organizing economic activities is indebted to the arrangement developed by Erik Olin Wright (2010).
5. Households also engage in reproductive labor. This includes the production and socialization of people who participate in market relations as sellers of labor power to firms. When this occurs, the firm is the site of production and buyer of labor power.
6. The concept of the social economy has been used since the 19th century in France, but it became widely used in Europe and other regions during the 20th century (Zhao, 2013). The practice of collectively providing for community to achieve social objectives, however, is quite old and existed in ancient African civilizations (Hosseini, 2016). In the United States, there has been less focus on the social economy and more attention devoted to the "solidarity economy." Social economy and solidarity economy formulations share a number of similar characteristics, including social enterprises with social justice values of cooperation and democratic participation. The solidarity economy framework is more international in scope than the social economy framework, and it is theorized in the context of global economic restructuring and neoliberalism (Allard & Mattheai, 2010). Kawano (2013) says that the term "Social Solidarity Economy (SSE)" has begun to be used in North America as a new framework for theorizing and putting into practice an economic system that provides an alternative to capitalism and other authoritarian systems by prioritizing the welfare of people and the planet over profits. Social economy organizations, however, often are situated between the private and public sectors of capitalist economies and may even serve as complements to capitalist production through the services provided.
7. It is important to note that community-based nonprofit organizations that have market interactions often develop out of women's informal, unpaid collective efforts to challenge injustices and disparities within their communities. For example, S. B. Collins et al. (2011) state that the six nonprofit Canadian community organizations in their study emerged out of women's struggles for social justice and that the organizations enable women to collectively work on issues of food security, housing, racism, employment, and child care. We can think of these nonprofit community organizations that often have paid and unpaid staff members as illustrating what happens when informal collective action groups move into the sphere of long-term community-based advocacy and support.
8. The objective of this article is to foreground the unpaid and nonmarket work that racialized women perform together through informal groups in response to community disparities and injustices and to elevate women's unpaid community work to be on par with that of the household. Other frameworks that focus on the community as unit of analysis do so by examining *formal organizations* that often participate in market relations as nonprofits. For example, the community economy approach developed by Graham and Cornwell (2009) is in line with traditional social economy studies of organizations rather than of unpaid

labor. Graham and Cornwell focus on community organizations that provide services to low-income communities in western Massachusetts. Similarly, Gibson-Graham's (2008) "Diverse Economies" explores different economic activities according to several binaries for organizing transactions, labor, and enterprises, respectively: market/nonmarket, wage/unpaid, and capitalist/noncapitalist. Although they view neighborhood work as a form of unpaid labor, they do not have a nonmarket example that encompasses the ways in which Black women in the United States transact their economic activities. Nor is it necessarily the case that neighborhood work takes place collectively. Gibson-Graham's (2006) formulation of community economies is broad based and incorporates a variety of actions, decisions, movements, and organizations that have the goal of community development and care. Their community economies are similar to solidarity economies in that each seeks to create a more participatory, democratic, and equitable economic arrangement that differs from capitalist economies. It may include, of course, women's community activism that challenges inequities. As such, those elements of their approach would be consistent with the framework developed here.

9. For discussion of African American thought regarding the social economy and the extent to which they formed cooperative associations, see Bhattacharya (2017).
10. Noted 20th century Black women activists who led social justice community campaigns include Ida B. Wells Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, Mary McLeod Bethune, Fannie Lou Hamer, Septima Clark, Dorothy Height, Ella Baker, Daisy Bates, Elaine Brown, Angela Davis, Jo Ann Robinson, Rosa Parks, Diane Nash, Assata Shakur, Kathleen Cleaver, Barbara Smith, Florynce Kennedy, and Audre Lorde.
11. "The women of America who are doing humble but on the whole the most effective work in the social uplift of the lowly, not so much by money as by personal contact, are the colored women. Little is said or known about it but in thousands of churches and social clubs, in missionary societies and fraternal organizations, in unions like the National Association of Colored Women, these workers are founding and sustaining orphanages and old folk homes; distributing personal charity and relief; visiting prisoners; helping hospitals; teaching children; and ministering to all sorts of needs" (DuBois, 1924).
12. As with many community work endeavors, Concerned Citizens of South Central LA went on to become an incorporated nonprofit organization.
13. The terms "community work" and "unpaid community work" are not new. Scholars of community-based research such as S. B. Collins et al. (2011) use the term "women's community work" to describe the activities of women's organizations in Canada that provide collective provisions. The objective of this article is the development of a *theoretical* framework for understanding women's unpaid/nonmarket collective community activist work and the elevation of this unpaid collective community work to the level of unpaid work performed within households.
14. Marginalized women engage in activist collective action work globally when they challenge and mobilize around environmental harms, rising food prices, immigrant abuses, neoliberal practices, sexual and/or racial-ethnic violence, police/military abuses, religious discrimination, and so on.
15. This framework is a *starting point* around which to think about a variety of ways in which people experience oppression and perform unpaid collective work due to inequities involving sexual identity, sexuality, citizenship status, religion, nationality, and other factors.
16. The "firm" here may be a private or public sector workplace.
17. The feminist emphasis on "couples," whether married or cohabiting, same-sex or different sex, privileges this household configuration. We need a more expansive understanding of

- unpaid labor and decision-making within households that examines relations between and among household members who are part of other family configurations. These include lone parents, multigeneration, multiple-family, multihouseholds, and so on.
18. This is evident in the exclusion of Black women from cash assistance programs for lone, poor mothers for most of the history of the Aid to Dependent Children/AFDC program and the subsequent White backlash when Black women and children were finally able to receive AFDC payments.
  19. Black women's performance of domestic work—reproductive labor—also benefits White men within households because they do not feel pressure from their partners to perform this work.
  20. Exploitation occurs when someone other than the direct producer—or producers—appropriate the surplus. In collective production for the community and collective appropriation by the community, exploitation does not occur.
  21. Firms' exclusion of ex-felons from employment enables them to maintain a pool of unemployed workers whose existence helps to keep wages low and enables firms to have control (dominance) over their workers.
  22. The argument that I make here is that the community is a site of unpaid work that we should theorize as a site of production similar to the firm and household. A fuller analysis would include the state and its roles in production and social provisioning.

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