Introduction

The main argument of this paper is that a simultaneous shift of attention from markets to the sustainability of life is occurring in both theoretical and political feminist discourse on economics. Economics has been a male-dominated science and thus presents androcentric biases in the context of discovery as well as in the context of justification (Harding, 1995). A key androcentric bias is the restriction of its content to the study of markets. Markets have been placed at the centre of economic discourses through the construction of a dichotomous structure that identifies the economy with markets and work with remunerated labour. These pairs are not gender neutral. In this terminology markets are used as the normative and normalised term that reflect masculinity. Women and the feminine have been invisibilized. The process of decentring markets is a deconstruction process by which the feminine other are recovered. This process is taking place at two levels. On the one hand, within feminist economics there is a discussion on what should be the content of economics, where production boundaries, which put the limits of the realm of economics, should be placed. This discussion explores for example, what is economic and what is work. On the other hand, within the feminist movement a debate about the desirability of full employment and the possibilities of reconciling family and working lives is emerging. Different opinions can be linked to the centrality that markets -and, specifically, the labour market- are granted. Although the debate within the feminist movement does not explicitly refer to the debate within feminist economics, clear links can be drawn. This paper tries to show the main aspects of all those discussions.

It is important to make some points about this paper. Firstly, the theoretical discussion will refer to feminist economics literature from a broad Western context, while the political section will be limited to the Spanish context. Secondly, it will identify the monetized spheres of the economy with markets. A direct implication of this is the lack of a serious study of the state. This lack might be partially justified because the focus of this paper is attending to money as a benchmark when defining the realm of economics (and the public sector is also monetized). Thirdly, the term markets will be used to refer to capitalist markets. All these points are undoubtedly limitations of the paper and imply the need to supplement it.

The text is divided into two broad sections. The first and more theoretical one starts with an overview of conventional economic theories that have limited the content of economics to the study of markets. This limitation is argued to be a key feature of the phallocentric structure of the discourse of economics. Two feminist attempts to deconstruct such discourse are identified. The first one focuses on discovering the invisibilized terms of the dichotomy and interrelationships. Nevertheless, the binary structure is not threatened but reinforced. Thus a second strategy tries to transcend the binary structure by using a different analytical category: sustainability of life. The implications of using this concept are further explored. The second section applies the idea of a progressive decentring of markets to discussions within the feminist movement. Two main views are identified. The first one is said to use a market-based discourse that is challenged by opposing feminists who no longer believe in either full employment nor in reconciliation. Summing up, similar questions on the possibilities of integrating women into the economic discourse as well as the economic system are raised. This paper explores whether such integration is possible without previously changing the discourse in order to move beyond the ideal of markets.
What is economics? First attempts to deconstruct an androcentric market-based paradigm

One of the clearest consensuses within feminist economics is about the narrowness of mainstream definitions of the domain of economics as well as the attempt to do more inclusive definitions, which include domestic labour. However, this initial agreement on the need to expand the content of economics does not lead to a consensus on how it should be done. The following section will explore those ideas.

Mainstream definitions of the economy

Mainstream definitions of what the economy is (and thus what should be the content of economic theory) share a key feature, which is the location of markets as the centrepiece of the whole discourse. The economy is identified with the monetized spheres of production, distribution and consumption.

Classical political economy was not initially restrained to the study of markets (Pujol, 1992). On the one hand, political economics was defined as “the study of social rules governing the production and distribution of material resources that satisfy human needs” (Barbé, 1996:18). On the other hand, a systemic link between the (re)production subsystem of goods and services and the (re)production subsystem of people underlay classical theory; this systemic link can be clearly perceived in Smith’s wage theory. Thus key aspects can already be pointed out: the focus on human needs; the understanding of economic relationships as social relationships; the neglecting of a clear division between what were later called “production” and “reproduction” spheres; and the material content. Feminist economists are at present trying to recover the first three ones at the same time as they question the last one. How was this broad understanding of the economy lost? The loss was progressive and implied a shift of attention from human needs towards (market) exchange, from use values towards exchange values, from social relationships towards market leaded forces (demand and supply). The defining characteristic of labour was no longer whether it produced any material goods but whether its product had any exchange value (that is, whether it could be exchanged for money). Specialization, a distinctive characteristic of any market economy, was understood as the foundation of progress. The invisible hand of market (and its driving force: self-interest) became the sacred leading principle of economic efficiency and social well being. Markets were placed at the centre of theoretical and political discourses and human needs, use values and non-egoistic motives were marginalized.

Marxism shared many insights with classical political economics regarding to what was to be defined as production and work. Thus, it maintained (and has kept on maintaining) the focus on market at a theoretical level and strengthened it at a political one, by privileging the struggle of the working class over any other. A tension between the so-called transcultural marxist theory and the historical theory (the one created to explain capitalism) has been pointed out (Nicholson, 1990). While the former would recognise all use value production, the latter attends only to the production of exchange values (commodities). This one being the most developed, markets are again privileged over any other form of social organisation. Marxist historical theory uses the term real work for labelling the one that can become abstract work, i.e., can be exchanged in the market. All other kinds of work are non-real and, ultimately, non-work. Women’s reproductive (in biological terms) work could even be considered to be less than human, because the distinctive characteristic of human work is its progressive nature, its increasing detachment from natural needs. As Di Stefano (1996) puts it “Marxism is deeply embedded in a masculine horizon of meaning and sensibility”.

All this happened at the same time as men were fighting for wage labour as their masculine privilege. Feminist have argued that working class men’s struggles tried to push women away from labour market and to establish the male-breadwinner / female-carer family model as the underlying logic of Welfare States. I.e. the creation of Welfare States was not a gender-neutral process. It contributed to women’s exclusion from the monetized spheres of the economy at the
same time as wage labour was becoming the unique source of remunerations and social benefits. To sum up, market activity became the only focus of economic theory, the symbol of progress, the basic structure of social organisation and the specifically male responsibility (for women, at least ideally, should remain at home). Markets were being placed at the epicentre of both the socio-economic structure and the economic discourse.

Neoclassical school is the successor of classical political economics. However, it did not only maintain the classical definition of the scope of economics, but made it even clearer. Economics is understood as “the study of human behaviour with respect to the relationship between aims and scarce resources that have alternative uses” (Robbins, 1932:212). A resource is defined as scarce as long as it has got a price. All perspective on the necessary interrelationship between markets and the so-called reproductive sphere was lost. This process went hand in hand with the attempts to turn economics into an exact science that could use mathematics to apprehend the interaction of the market-driven forces supply and demand.

The dichotomous structure of economic theory

The previous section has shown that the content of economics was reduced to a focus on monetized activity, although it initially was much more inclusive. This reduction is linked to the androcentric epistemology underlying economic theory. This dualistic and hierarchical epistemology divides the world into two different spheres: the economic / the non-economic, work / non-work. The whole attention is directed to the former, which is considered to be the normal and normative. The latter is invisibilized. These pairs are linked to the masculine / feminine, Western / non-Western. Androcentric as well as ethnocentric biases underlie the economic discourse. As Hewitson (1999) explains it, neoclassical economics produces the “perfect couple”: masculine presence / feminine absence. It presupposes but renders invisible the reproduction of society. And according to Barns’ (2002) perspective, the economic / social divide, which has recently been deepened by the neo-liberal wave in economic theory and policy, has been constructed as a series of stories facing the-economic-as-objective-as-masculine to the-social-as-subjective-as-feminine.

In other words, expanding the content of economics can be seen as a deconstruction process that challenges the centrality of (masculine) markets. This process is linked to a de-centring of markets in the ontology, epistemology and methodology of economic theory. However, covering all these dimensions (or, at least, some aspects of them) would exceed the aim of this paper. The following section will explore how feminist economics has tackled this deconstruction process.

The discovery of households and domestic labour

An attempt has been made to validate and make visible women’s contribution to the economy since the earliest moves of what is now named feminist economics. The objectives were diverse: gaining recognition for women, showing that their absence from labour market was not a matter of choice, emphasizing the significance of women’s reproductive labour to the economy and providing a materialist explanation for women’s economic disadvantage. All these issues were firstly raised by the authors included in the theoretical debate known as Domestic Labour Debate, which took place from late 60s to early 80s (e.g. Dalla Costa, Himmelweit, Seccombe, Gardiner, Molyneux, Harstock, Beneria, Delphy...) and expanded by authors arguing for a Dual System Theory (e.g. Mitchell, Hartmann, Eisenstein, O’Brien...). It must be said that these “schools” have been exogenously and retrospectively labelled. Authors themselves might not identify themselves with any of them. However, all of them shared a marxist / marxian starting point. Nevertheless, the literature aimed to highlight the importance of economic activity within households was not constrained to a marxist perspective. Important research has been done from neoclassical approaches. Even a distinctive branch of this school has been developed to study domestic labour and intra-households processes of economic bargaining. It has been called New
Home Economics and its most important author is Gary Becker. Nevertheless, it could under no circumstances be described as feminist.

Therefore feminists tried to revert conventional visions of the economic system that turned it into a masculine leaded terrain from which women were excluded. On the one hand, they emphasized working class women’s presence at the labour market, which had been reduced although never disappeared. On the other hand, they claimed that there was an entire economic sphere that had been historically shadowed and in which women were the major figures. Obtaining data on how much domestic labour is done in our societies has counted for a great part of feminist research. Thus it could be said that “the other”, the “not-A term” of economic discourse was soon discovered. Moreover, connections between the two distinctive spheres of the economy, the monetized and the non-monetized, were drawn. They were not understood in isolation but as interrelated social dimensions. To sum up, the economy was not just markets and wage labour, but also households and domestic labour. The latter must be added to conventional research. A different vision of the economic system appears when adding the non-monetized sphere. Women are no longer absent, but present in the economy. And as women started to enter the labour market, they became present in both spheres. Besides, the whole economic structure needed women's unpaid work. The already mentioned male-breadwinner/female-carer family model that underlay the socio-economic organisation was identified. Markets needed such unpaid work to guarantee the daily reproduction of the work force. The working of Welfare States was based on and strengthened that family model.

It can be said that a certain deconstruction strategy was being used that involved: naming the others, the non-normative terms; and identifying the interrelationships existing between the visible and the invisible terms, which were previously supposed to be independent from each other. Women’s absence from the economy, that is, from markets, was balanced out with women’s presence at the other side of economic activity. Nevertheless, as Hewitson (1999) shows, this strategy leaves in place binary oppositions and may even strengthen them. The following section will explore this in more detail.

**The reinforcement of binary oppositions**

*The discussion on work*

The debate on what is work and what is not may be the clearest to show how the “centering of the market can occur in more subtle forms than the explicit exclusion of non-market activities” (Wood, 1997:49). As it has been said, feminist economists totally agree that there are non-remunerated activities that should be considered to be economically significant. I.e. the meaning of the term work should never be reduced to remunerated work (wage labour, employment). Thus if the condition of being paid for is no longer the distinctive characteristic of work, how is it to be defined?

Himmelweit (1995) argues that the previously explained “discovery” of women’s contribution to the economy has been done by recognizing it as work. And that in doing so a pre-existing category of work borrowed from an economics which inherently failed to value most of what made women’s contribution distinctive has been used. What are the -rather implicit- requirements for an activity to be considered to be work? For market-based activities, the criterion is simply that they are exchanged for money. But, what about non-market activities? Three criteria can be mentioned. Firstly, it must be a purposeful activity, that is, it must not be leisure and it must have an opportunity cost. Secondly, a social division of labour must be possible. And thirdly, a separation of the task from the person who does it must also be possible. To sum up, “[...] ‘work’ is a purposeful activity that takes time and energy, forms part of a division of labour and is separable from the person who does it” (Himmelweit, 1995:4). This definition excludes, on the one hand, any personal implication at work, and, on the other hand, self-fulfilling activities. It is a definition based on the so-called third party criterion, which states that a productive activity is one where a total separability between work and the worker is
feasible. Different versions of this criterion have been used by most feminist economists despite the fact that it is clearly derived from capitalist wage labour in manufacturing. Marxism itself recognizes that the possible separability of work (that is, the undertaken task) and the work force (that is, the concrete worker) is one of the distinctive characteristics of capitalism. Thus the feasibility of this division is a directly market-derived criterion. Saying that an activity is work to the degree it could be done by any other person is the same as saying that this task could be undertaken by markets.

But, what is the problem with using the (market-derived) third party criterion? Wood (1997) mentions a number of issues. According to that criterion, domestic labour is economic to the degree it resembles a commodity. Hence, is it somehow less than economic to the degree it does not resemble a commodity? This criterion also precludes the existence of economic activity unique to the household. Using this criterion implies a direct attempt to exclude personal aspects, because the higher degree of separability, the less personal utility is produced. How could feminism exclude the personal if it has forcefully argued that the personal is political, that the private is public? Emotional, libidinal, sensuous and bodily aspects of women’s activities are marginalized (Beasley, 1994). Subjective aspects are neglected, despite the fact that domestic labour “[...] implies social and emotional relationships that are not easily separable from the particular activity” (Carrasco, 2001:15). That is, the material aspects of women’s work is understood as economic, but not the immaterial, subjective one. The final critique by Wood is that the third party criterion is almost always used inconsistently. She affirms that there are activities that are defined as work when they are carried out in markets but that are not analysed when they are not exchanged for money. She gives the examples of childbirth, emotional care taking and sex. But, as Hewitson has thoroughly demonstrated for the case of childbirth (surrogate motherhood), this activity is considered to be economic as long as it has been deprived of all its specifically feminine features. The surrogate mother “[...] is included in the realm of contract only in so-far as she becomes the ‘equal’ as men. Real woman remains the ‘other’ of the contracting agent” (1999:211). Thus it can be said that a market-based paradigm is also a phallocentric one in which dimensions associated with the feminine such as sexed bodies, subjectivity and emotionality are always necessarily marginalized.

It can be concluded that incorporating domestic labour into new definitions of economic activity does not necessarily achieve feminist goals of de-centring the market and re-valuing the feminine other. This achievement depends on how domestic labour is incorporated. The previously discussed way, while having contributed to the visibilisation of some aspects of unpaid work, has also increased the invisibility of tasks different from a (masculine) market-derived notion of work. It goes without saying that the economic significance of markets and wage labour was not questioned at all; i.e. the normative term is not questioned but reinforced by defining the economic “others” in terms of the same as or different from markets / wage labour.

The discussion on capitalism and patriarchy

Binary oppositions and markets privilege are also reinforced in two other dimensions: on the one hand, the kind of questions that are raised and the way in which they are sorted out show that the final interest often lies on the monetized sphere; on the other hand, a dichotomous discourse is used in order to explain women’s economic situation around the pair capitalism / patriarchy.

Some examples may suffice to explain the first statement. Much of feminist neoclassical research has dealt with unpaid work with the only aim of explaining market phenomena such as: women’s lower activity rate, wage differences, occupational segregation, diverse kinds of gender discrimination in the labour market... Other feminist research has treated households with the same tools used for an analysis of markets (demand and supply frameworks, non-cooperative game theory, transaction costs approaches...). Aspects that could not be tackled with market-derived tools have been disregarded or labelled as non-economic. Robeyns (2000)
argues that this inability to fully incorporate women’s experience is a defining characteristic of what she names gender economics in comparison to feminist economics. With respect to marxist feminist economics it can be pointed out that one of its most important worries has been to explain what the contribution of women’s unpaid work to capitalism was, and what its share in the reproduction of the work force was, i.e. how it collaborated with the capitalist mode of production through the production of a concrete commodity: labour. Another important worry has been women’s role as a reserve army of capitalism. It can be concluded that the final focus of attention is always the monetized dimension; both as a result of a direct priority or as an effect of the inability to tackle other dimensions with conventional market-derived concepts and categories.

The discovery of households and domestic labour easily led to the expansion of binary pairs and the construction of a dichotomous discourse. What conventionally was thought to be non-economic was in fact economic. And this recently labelled economic sphere was the realm of patriarchy and gender oppression. While markets were the public sphere, ruled by capitalism and where class oppression occurred, households were the private sphere, where patriarchy imposed a gendered exploitation. Factories versus households, production versus reproduction, class identity versus gender identity... Capitalism was restrained to markets, and patriarchy was restrained to households. Although the two systems were seen as interconnected, the interrelationships were not made. Either one of the systems, almost always capitalism, was considered to be the leading one and hence the one which should organise political struggle (Scott, 1986) or an ahistorical and static analysis was achieved, which permitted to “understand” social structures now, but not their dynamics (Kergoat, 1984). Another related problem is that other aspects of women’s oppression were not considered (Young, 1980) or, at least, not considered to have any economic dimension. And, finally, differences among women were disregarded. Coming back to the debate on work, it can be pointed out that identifying domestic labour as “the other” of economic discourse, entailed the invisibilisation of any kind of unpaid labour different from Western women’s unpaid activities. I.e. the notion of domestic labour is a Western one that explicitly excludes non-Western women’s labour at their households by defining it as subsistence work (Wood, 1997). Establishing domestic labour as “the other” implied that work different from both wage and domestic remained out from the feminist analysis of capitalism and patriarchy. This has to do with a notion of patriarchy where the main material base of women’s oppression was said to universally be intra-household distribution of work. Feminist economics has often been accused of being ethnocentric and classist.

The attempt to transcend the dichotomy

Sustainability of life

This paper has hitherto tried to show how the deconstruction strategy consisting in discovering the other of markets has not achieved feminist goals. Including a new field of study in the economic “fortress” so far taken up exclusively by markets has not challenged their centrality and has failed to challenge their coercive force and to revalue specifically feminine dimensions. A different strategy has recently appeared. It could be identified with Hewitson’s (1999) proposal of looking for a displacement of the binary structure through the creation of a third term or “hinge word”. The concept sustainability of life (or social provisioning) would be this “hinge word/term”.

The proposal is “to explicitly focus on how each society solves its problems in sustaining human life […] which mechanisms are used to meet human needs” (Carrasco, 2001:12). Carrasco’s term “sustainability of life” is intended to substitute the more commonly used concept of “social reproduction”, because the concept of reproduction could be said to be too polluted in Amoros’ (1985) sense that is has been too widely used in opposition to production (the feminine sphere vs. the masculine one). Another attempt to provide alternatives is the concept of “social provisioning” (Power, 2003; Nelson, 1992, 1996). Both terms imply a focus on the ways how “humans try to meet their needs for goods and services” (Nelson, 1992:119).
This idea would imply a situated analysis (Haraway, 1988) and the establishment of meaningful economic sectors in each given context, instead of pre-establishing them. Attending to the sustainability of life would entail an emphasis on power relationships. The focus must not be reduced to a study of provisioning, because it would risk studying individual actors and choices. Hence the focus must be on social provisioning, meaning that economic activity is an interdependent social process. The dynamic of economic relations are a myriad ways that sustainability of life and social provisioning can be carried out. Sustainability of life understood as the social process of satisfying human needs draws on Sen’s focus on capabilities and deprivations (e.g. Sen, 1985).

The debate on needs

To make the sustainability of life the central analytical category immediately generates the debate on needs. What needs should the economic system meet? Two aspects must be mentioned. Firstly, the multidimensionality of human needs. Talking about needs goes back to the earliest statements of classical political economics. But there is an important difference to be made. While classical authors argued that economics was about how societies met their material needs, actual feminist economists stress that needs are multidimensional and heterogeneous. Needs include a more “objective” dimension -closer to biological necessities- and a more “subjective” dimension -that refers to the need for affection, care, the establishment of social links, participation in social dynamics... Needs are “material”, “tangible” ones -such as the need for medicines- and “immaterial” ones -such as the need for emotional support to get over an illness. The use of quotation marks implies that the separability of material/immaterial, objective/subjective needs is not possible at a practical level and it can be said to be impossible even at a theoretical one. I.e. adding immaterial needs to material ones would not solve the problem. In that sense Beasley (1994) states that a deconstruction of the economy and work needs to go hand by hand with a deconstruction of emotionality and subjectivity. This process could help to surmount the lack of dialogue between feminist theory and feminist economics that has been pointed out by authors like Robeyns (2000). Feminist economists' inability to integrate "material" and "cultural" dimensions could be partially blamed for the inability to establish a fluid exchange between those two streams of feminist thought. Many feminist economists argue that the lack of dialogue is due to the shift "from things to words" (Barrett, in Robeyns, 2000) that has occurred in feminist theory, thus splitting up with feminist economics, which deals with issues of women's material oppression. A focus on needs could imply a greater integration between feminist theory and economics by bringing about a serious debate within feminist economics about how the economic system is related to both "material" and "cultural" issues.

Secondly, needs are socially constructed and hence social power relationships directly affect them. So, talking about needs does not imply romanticizing and glorifying existing needs, because they may reflect social hierarchies. To sum up, a whole redefinition and a continuing questioning of what is socially as well as individually perceived as necessary should be undertaken. A broad understanding of needs cannot postpone the study of aspects such as bodies, sex or emotions, which have been marginalized by conventional (and some feminists) economics. I.e. it would allow for the inclusion of aspects that have hitherto remained “on the edge of economic analysis” (Hyman, 1994:43)

The focus on needs raises important questions on various and linked gendered pairs: culture / nature, wants / needs, autonomy / dependence. The following section will explore the potential contribution of the debate on needs in the subsequent questioning of the pair wants / needs. The androcentric concept of the economy considered “wants” to be the terrain of desire, of progressive detachment from needs, which referred to humans’ biological ties. The economic system implied man’s control over nature. This idea is caught, for example, by marxist concept of human labour. Nelson explains how the deprecation of needs is linked to the deprecation of the feminine (1996). Recovering needs is a step forward to the recovering of feminine aspects
that have been marginalized from economic analysis and recognizing the inescapable
dependence of human bodies on their physical environment (hence it allows for a full
understanding of feminist economics with ecological economics). Hewitson clearly states that
procreative masculinity drawn by androcentric economic discourses would cease to exist
without the “absent presence of femininity [...] without the mother, the unrecognized but

The notion of wants and desires carries a pre-given conception of scarcity. Resources will
always be scarce with respect to unlimited wants, at the same time as consumer’s insatiability is
the leading idea of a market economy. But resources will not any longer be abstractly scarce if
needs are considered. It will be necessary to ask which resources, where and under which
circumstances are scarce (Hyman, 1994, 1998). This vision gives more chance for an economics
contributing to solve the bitter problems of global unequal distribution of wealth, which is
another of key feminist economics worries.

A final and related point should be addressed. The debate on needs refers also to the debate on
the pair independence / dependence. Individuals are neither totally independent on their
physical environment nor are they totally independent on each other (the imaginary of the
radical autonomous isolated agent being a key figure of androcentric economics). They are not
totally dependent either. Interdependence, understood as a dynamic and multidimensional
process that goes on during the whole life, challenges the dichotomy independence /
dependence. The implications of this pair are crucial. For example: while housewives are
doubtlessly considered dependent on their husbands’ incomes, men’s dependence on the care
they receive from their wives is not so easily identifiable. Lone mothers are considered to be
dependent on state support, while no recognition of social dependence on their contribution to
social reproduction is made. Social provisioning implies that the notion of dependency becomes
meaningless “[...] because all the members of the society (and beyond) are interdependent upon
each other” (Power, 2003:13).

Work, caring and feminisation of labour

Although no term has been proposed to replace the pair work / non-work, there are some
suggestions. Firstly, according to the notion of the economy as the processes of sustaining life
and satisfying human needs, every activity so aimed should be taken into account. The
boundaries establishing what should be included are vague. But in Carrasco and Mayordomo’s.
words “[...] we think that a concept with ambiguous limits but nevertheless adjusted to reality is
much richer than a very precise notion that is not useful for the analysis” (2000:5). So, the first
idea is that a broad and unclearly limited range of activities needs to be attended. Secondly,
whether all those activities should be labelled as work or not is a matter of discussion. But there
is a consensus on the need to attend to the characteristics and elements of those activities.
Wood, concludes from the previously mentioned debate on the effects of trying to define
women’s unpaid activities as work: “Of course, all this may suggest that we should dispense
with the whole idea of defining activities themselves as work or non work, and discuss instead
aspects of those activities” (1997:54-5). The process of understanding activities meaningful to
each context might provide us with concepts adequate for that concrete place and moment.

In this sense, care / caring / caring work / caring labour (all of them are used) covers a crucial
aspect of actual Western industrialised societies. It is integrated by two distinct elements
(Hewitson, 2002): caring as a motivation for action, which covers that labour motivated by a
desire to care; and caring as an activity. Both elements can appear together, but it is not a
necessary conditioniii. When there is a caring motivation, personal aspects are included and
affections and emotions are important -hence the third party criterion would define that activity
as non-work if it were undertaken outside from markets. It is a concept that transcends monetary
limits, because it may refer both to wage work and to unpaid work. Thus markets are no longer
the benchmark, although the existence of a monetary exchange will probably imply specific and
fundamental features. Caring is becoming a privileged focus of attention within feminist economics.

Finally, there is a growing literature on the so-called feminisation of labour. This concept refers to the processes through which " [...] the contempt and the conditions of today's work, which have been imposed after violent restructurings, are no more than the result of a tendency to expand the characteristics of those kinds of work, paid and unpaid, which have been structurally and historically assigned to women" (Malo, 2001). All this includes: work being insecure, flexible, precarious and not entitling to benefits and not carrying social recognition either; work requiring a high degree of adaptability, not allowing for a separability between working and living time; and the growing immaterial, emotional and relational dimensions of work versus that manufacture-derived material notion of work. To understand actual work tendencies, both within and outside the labour market, a new concept of work more receptive to those feminine aspects usually labelled as non-economic is needed, however it is called.

Some implications

Some debates can be deduced from a focus on sustainability of life that will be further explored when discussing feminist responses to the general strike.

A new perspective on social organisation

Asking how life is sustained in a given society implies that capitalist institutions and dynamics are not naturalised, but questioned (Power, 2003). Understanding how markets operate is not relevant per se. It is relevant because it allows knowing how markets contribute or prevent the satisfaction of needs. This point has key political implications that will be later explored. Another consequence is that the key characteristic of goods and services is not whether they can be exchanged at the market, but what human needs they may be able to satisfy (Nelson, 1996). Thus the economic significance of commodities is no longer presupposed, but questioned. Some commodities may even be labelled as anti-economic (Waring, 1988) in the sense that they consume a lot of resources without satisfying any need, more over, harming people. According to conventional economics, this production would be counted as an increase in national product (GNP) reflecting an increase in social economic well-being. But, since the economy is no longer equated to markets, concepts such as well-being, economic growth and progress should be questioned. Using sustainability of life as the central analytical category of economics is linked to key contemporary debates about the notion of development and poverty. Feminist economists are very active within both of them.

People's socio-economic well-being will depend on the social ability to satisfy their needs. Resources to do so can come from different economic spheres: monetized ones and non-monetized ones -integrated by diverse social institutions and where unpaid work takes place. The most important economic spheres in Western industrialised economies are markets, the state and households (e.g. Power, 2003, Nelson, 1996). But these spheres should not be presupposed. Their particular importance must be checked for each different context. The distinctive characteristics of each one of them should be studied. Each sphere should not in any case be researched in isolation. It is crucial to understand the interconnections and the interdependencies. Allowing for intermediate spaces is another crucial insight. Informal paid caring labour could be a clear example to show the ambiguity of limits, because it shares some aspects of formal employment -basically, being paid for-, and others with unpaid caring work -such as not entitling for social benefits, carrying little social recognition, and implying a strong emotional involvement. Sex worker's labour shares many of these characteristics, but it also implies a key social stigma that is not perceived if emotional and sexual dimensions are not taken into account.

A crucial point arising from this new perspective is that money is not a necessary resource per se. It is an indispensable resource when the market is the only way for satisfying certain needs.
Given that condition, employment is not necessary either. Employment is essential when it is the primary way of obtaining monetary resources, i.e. when neither the state nor other institutions provide them. Thus a focus on needs should imply questioning why such a close link among those three dimensions -satisfaction of needs / monetary resources / employment- exists in Western industrial economies. The motives underlying that link should be addressed, instead of taking the link for granted.

A more inclusive notion of the economy permits a reconsideration of the historical debate on women's absence from the economy versus women's presence within the economy. The already mentioned concept of "female absent presence" (Hewitson, 1999) goes beyond the attempts to counter-posed androcentric statements on women's absence from the economy to assertions of women's (double) presence in the other side of the economic system. Women are no longer absent neither present. Women have historically been absent present. They have always been the shadowed and invisibilized base of society. Their presence as well as their invisibility was necessary to build the masculine market sphere as the self-contained economic system. Another similar concept is Izquierdo's (1998) double presence/absence. This concept tries to emphasize various aspects: firstly, the already named female double presence in both the monetized and the non-monetized economic spheres; secondly, that trying to be simultaneously present in both of them is an impossible task. Neither do markets adapt their organisation to the notion that workers are not isolated individuals without any responsibility beyond their employment; nor life itself yields to markets needs and rhythms. I.e. that concept catches the underlying conflict between the needs of markets and the need of sustaining life that is visibly expressed in the daily conflicts that women face to reconcile their so-called family and working lives. This conflict is further explored in the next section.

Conflicting logics and social priorities

There is a key idea that is not new but takes on special significance within a sustainability of life perspective. It implies questioning which are the logics underlying each economic sphere. This question is not individually but collectively raised. The aim is not to understand the motives for each personal behaviour. The aim is to understand social processes. In that sense, capitalist markets' underlying logic is easily identified. Markets work as long as a process of accumulation occurs. It means that the immediate objective is to obtain benefits. This leading logic is recognized both by marxim and neoclassical economics. Feminist economists involved in the study of social provisioning and caring counter-posed the logic of accumulation and benefit to the logic underlying unpaid work. Unpaid work is always motivated by the existence of some need. I.e. the perception of an unsatisfied need is what motivates action. It does not mean that all unpaid work is a by-product of love, altruism or solidarity, this romantized vision has been highly contested by feminists (e.g. Hartmann and Folbre, 1988). It may be, for example, a consequence of a sense of duty or coercion. But it will always cause the immediate satisfaction of a particular need. That is the logic which underlies the production of use values (Folbre, 1995), which is totally different from the one underlying exchange value production. A commodity may satisfy a human need, but it will do so as long as benefit is generated during the interim. Thus the “invisible heart” (Folbre, 2001) coexists with the invisible hand. These two different logics easily collude and the emergence of conflicting interests is frequent.

The subsequent question is which logic is socially privileged. What is the leading logic in a given society, the logic of care or the logic of benefit? Carrasco affirms, “this new perspective [the one that focus on sustainability of life processes] allows us to reveal which interests are prioritized by any society” (2001:13). In Western market economies a crucial aspect is the degree to which the logic of accumulation organises the whole socio-economic structure and the ways (often subtle) it is done. I.e. the widely recognized leading role of the logic of accumulation is no longer naturalised neither restrained to the realm of markets. Understanding its importance in organising social times, spaces, political institutions, even our own bodies, etc. is a crucial task for feminist economics.
Social responsibility and sustainability of life

Who carries the ultimate responsibility to ensure social provisioning? This question is similar to Folbre’s famous quote “who pays for the kids?” which as she says, is “[...] the short version of a larger question: how are the costs of social reproduction distributed?” (1994). Coexisting economic spheres contribute to the sustainability of life. All of them are interrelated and react to changes in each other. The degree of social and economic well-being is the final result of the activity of all of them. To find out who is carrying the ultimate responsibility to guarantee social provisioning tells us who ultimately is driving the economic system. I.e. what interplay of simultaneous presences and absences of different social agents in/from diverse spheres of the economy is occurring, and who is finally guaranteeing that the play works. Women's presence in the economy is no longer the only questioned one. What has happened to men's /markets' / state's presence? An example for the Spanish context is that 80% of personal caring services are provided by families, and in these families 82% of the caring services are provided by women. The public sector provides no more than 8%. Markets are progressively losing any responsibility to take care of employees when they become sick, disabled or elderly. And this unfair distribution of caring work is not a distinctively Spanish phenomenon, but a Western reality (although differences are found). Hence it seems reasonable to question men's, markets’ and state's presence in the caring sphere.

Feminist economics has argued for a long time that households are the basic economic units that adjust themselves to compensate for changes in the monetized spheres of markets and the state. They play a crucial role as “the adjustment variable in the economic cycle” (Carrasco and Mayordomo, 2000:7). Processes of privatization and social benefits cuts have led to an increase in unpaid work in order to compensate for the loosen resources. There is a huge body of literature in this respect. But households are the terrain of gendered power relationships. Thus responsibilities within them are not fairly shared. Women are the ones who do the greatest part of unpaid work. Women are who really re-adjust the economic system in order to permit the sustainability of life. Women are the cushion of the economic system. Nevertheless, this idea is no more than an initial insight that must be contrasted for each situation and that must be complemented by a focus on differences among women.

Gathering together some ideas

Economics is a phallocentric discourse that is built around the foundational dichotomy economic / non economic (work / non work). The economy has been equated to markets; hence markets have been placed at the centre of the whole discourse. This binary structure is gendered. Markets are the realm of procreative masculinity through which civilization as a progressive detachment from biological needs occurs. Women and the feminine are excluded from the economy and from economics, but their shadowed presence is indispensable. Feminist attempts to expand the content of economics, which was firstly aimed at recovering women’s unpaid domestic labour, can be understood as a deconstruction process aimed to decentre markets and to recover the feminine others of economic discourse. This paper has explained some aspects of the debates arising from this process. Current feminist strategy provides a hinge analytical category that can help to transcend the dichotomous discourse. Thus feminist economics proposes the concept sustainability of life (social provisioning) as the central analytical category of economics. Sustainability of life would displace markets as the main focus of attention. This shift would allow for a serious debate on needs and work that could recover women’s economic activity without equating it to men’s wage labour and without dismissing distinctively feminine aspects. Other changes might also be possible such as: A new perspective on social organisation, analysing in what way markets as well as other economic institutions contribute to the satisfaction of human needs. Important questions are: what interests are given priority in a certain society?; who carries the responsibility of guaranteeing the sustainability of life?; is there a fair share of responsibilities among all economic agents? These questions have important political implications. The next section addresses some of them, mainly the debate on the
desirability and feasibility of full employment and the reconciliation of family and working lives. These two ideas can be said to catch the whole discussion on the desirability, unavoidability and centrality of markets that is taking place within (Spanish) feminist movement. This debate will be illustrated with the concrete discussion that took place within Spanish feminist movement as a result of the strike call on 20th June 2002. I.e. that concrete event is used in order to exemplify a broader and lasting discussion that cannot be in any case restrained to that specific moment.

**Feminist responses to the general strike June 2002**

This section tackles the explicit political dimensions of the theoretical discussion. Most feminist economists within the academia deal with political issues. It could be said that there are two agreements within feminist economics. Firstly, that “values enter into economic analysis at many different levels” (Schneider and Shackelford, 1998). And secondly, that the focus should be helping to solve problems (Robeyns, 2000; Hyman, 1994, 1998). Hence, most authors make political suggestions to perceived problems concerning the process of social provisioning. But the following sections will not refer to political reflections within the academia, but to political discussions within the feminist movement. Hence there will be a partial lack of theoretical support to political statements. Nevertheless, the analysis aims to complement what perhaps has been a too theoretical and academic reflection: to show connections between feminist discussions within the academia and debates within the feminist movement (although this connections may often be unconscious); and to display how a simultaneous process of decentring markets is occurring in both fields.

**The strike: an introduction**

On 20th June the fifth general strike in Spain since the restoration of democracy in 1977 took place. It was organised by the two main Spanish trade unions (CCOO and UGT) and other minor ones, in response to the approved governmental decree RD-L 5/2002 “Reform of the protection of unemployment and the basic law on employment”, approved in the 27th May with the only favourable votes of the governing People’s Party. This strike led to the reversal of some of the most criticised points of the new law and, in that sense, was quite successful. The evolution of economic policy in Spain has not differed from the global trend towards freer markets, progressive privatisation and decreasing Welfare State provisions. Among those increasingly deregulated markets is the labour market (national labour markets, but not international ones, where more restrictive migration rules are being established; Spain is relentlessly playing its role of gatekeeper of the “nearest to Africa European door”!). So more precarious and unsafe forms of contracting have emerged, dismissals have been facilitated and became cheaper, unemployment protection has been weakened, and general social protection has been damaged. Through this long ongoing process five general strikes have been organised.

Among the most controversial aspects of the legal changes were considerable tightening of eligibility for unemployment benefit, early retirement and agrarian subsidies. The success of the strike in terms of the number of participants was highly debated. Numbers ranged from 84% according to the trade unions to the official 17%. Nevertheless, the political effects were very important, with the dismissal of the Minister of Labour and the recent reversal of most of the conflicting measures.

Although responses from feminism were diverse, two main trends could be observed. The first emerges from the Women’s Secretaries of the two largest unions (CCOO and UGT). The centrepiece of their analysis is the labour market around which the problems, solutions and ways of political response are articulated. The second one comes from a more dispersed circle integrated by diverse feminist groups. Explaining any shared ideas is quite difficult because of the still insufficient development of their discourse. But a general disagreement with market-centred visions is clearly perceived as well as a dissatisfaction with the perspective of solving
women’s economic problems through their integration in a masculine model of market economy.

_A market-based feminist vision of the general strike; arguing for full employment_

_The identification of problems_

Women’s disadvantaged position in all the variables that measure labour market achievements is the departure point of their analysis. This includes a full range of data. Women’s labour market participation rate (41.68%) is much lower than men’s (66.70%) and than other European women’s. Unemployment rates present the opposite tendency, women accounting for 59.11% of total unemployment and Spanish women’s rate being 18.8% vs. other European women’s average of 9%. Female long run unemployment is also much larger than men’s. The result is that female occupation in Spain (43.3%) is far below what would be desirable and far below male one (72.4%). Besides employed women suffer from further discrimination. Their jobs are of poor quality. Although part-time employment is not widely spread in Spain (just 8% of total jobs), it is an expanding and highly feminised kind of contract (78.4% of part-time contracts are held by women). Temporary jobs are also growing and more often used to contract women (25.4% of total contracts are temporary, but women’s rate is higher: 28.8%). There is a rampant occupational segregation responsible for women being concentrated in traditionally female occupations where wages are lower. This direct and indirect discrimination means that women’s earnings are 25% to 30% lower than men’s depending on different estimates. Finally, only 45.05% of unemployed women receive any kind of benefit versus 75.34% of men. Women’s benefits are of a lower quality and amount than men’s. For example, 42.18% of women receiving an unemployment benefit are receiving a non-contributory one, which is far below the poverty line. This occurs to 37.40% of men.

What does happen with those aspects that are not strictly related with the labour market but with other spheres of the economy? Three different views can be identified. Firstly, some feminists make no references at all to other spheres of the economy, except talking occasionally about the informal economy (but without expanding the idea). This is a totally market-centred perspective, where markets are not the centre-piece of the analysis, but the only identified reality. Secondly, other feminists point out that women receive an unfair share of unpaid work. The problem with this position is that no connections between unpaid work and the labour market are established. And, finally, some feminists do make those connections: “The reconciliation of family and working lives is another chief worry because nowadays it is still a great obstacle for women’s employment and promotion” (CCOO, 2001:3). Hence, recognised interrelationships are one way, domestic labour negatively affecting employment. Thus, the economic “other” (households) is considered in a negative way, as a deficiency and a problem for full integration in the normative sphere (labour market). This deficiency is regarded as a specifically female deviation. Hence, the critique that is made to the actual socio-economic situation is limited to wage labour problems and when references to other economic realities are made, either no connections with markets are drawn, or a deviant status is conferred to the non-monetized, female sphere.

These feminists consider that approved legal reforms would undoubtedly worsen women’s already weak situation. Women would be disproportionately damaged by the general tightening of eligibility for unemployment benefit as long as they are the greatest part of the unemployed population. Additionally, other measures would have a worse effect on women than on men. The best example are some measures that make more difficult the reconciliation of family and working life given that reconciliation is mainly a female problem. Another criticism remarks that the legal reform will encourage a negative view of unemployed people. This implicitly promoted view considers unemployed people to be a kind of Welfare State free riders. “The criminalisation of (potentially) unemployed people is served. They will be suspicious of either taking advantage of public services or of committing fraud” (Moreno, 2002:19). At the same time “those who have no need to worry are employers” (Moreno, 2002:19), because no
additional measures aimed to discover and to stop their frauds and abuses are implemented. This is considered to be a fraud against the working class and a visible aspect of the employers-employees conflict. However, in the discussion the significance of these issues for the global distribution of social provisioning responsibilities is not pointed out. The process by which markets are more and more exempted from their share of responsibility is not highlighted. This lack implicitly means that the responsibility for the sustainability of life is understood to fall on someone else's shoulders (whether households or the state). Finally, the criticism of the attempt to criminalize unemployed people is not supplemented neither with a criticism to the criminalization of people who are not incorporated into the labour market nor with a questioning of the reasons why unpaid work does not entitle to benefits. I.e. unpaid work is not fully recognized as socially meaningful work. Ultimately, the real economic sphere is the market, where remunerated work takes place.

Proposed solutions

The proposed alternative from the two main Women’s Union Secretaries is the active seeking not only of full employment but also of all jobs carrying work security, good conditions and entitlement to welfare benefits (what they call “full high quality employment”). In order to achieve it, three main goals should be encouraged. Firstly, increasing women’s participation rate to the threshold of 60%, an objective that the European Union proposed to all its members by the deadline of 2010 in the Barcelona Summit (Zarapuz, 2002). Secondly, reducing female unemployment. And thirdly, decreasing the precariousness and temporary nature of employment that disproportionately affects women. To achieve these goals would require various measures. Active labour market policies, currently almost non-existent, should promote female employment and avoid diverse discriminations that prevent women's accessing to certain occupations and receiving fair wages. Changes in labour market regulations in the opposite direction to recent trends should promote high-quality contracts. So-called new sources of employment (or proximity services) should be encouraged. These new jobs would be mostly held by women and would permit to simultaneously tackle the problems of female unemployment and women's double burden. Additional measures allowing the reconciliation of family and labour lives should be implemented to free women from one of the main reason that avoid their full labour market incorporation. All this should be accompanied by an adequate benefit system that would cover those in unemployment and other precarious situations, such as lone mothers.

Hence the main objective of these feminists is achieving full employment. This would require enabling women to reconcile their family and working lives. They do believe that encouraging female labour market incorporation is the best way to solve women's economic problems and promote a real equal opportunities policy. To sum up, the discourse is still centred around the labour market and no references to the caring sphere are made — except to implement measures that free women from those responsibilities, i.e. that make women equal to men by correcting their deviant status as carers.

Women's political intervention

The extent to which women are able to participate in the strike is not questioned. Women are told: “employment and social protection are your rights, do not let them be removed”, which means, “support the strike”. The former sentence was the slogan of the manifesto by CCOO and UGT Women's Secretaries. There are two aspects that can be pointed out. On the one hand, it is not clear whether they are talking to employed women or to all women. Since feminist groups were asked to join the manifesto, it could be inferred that they are trying to convince all women of the need of the strike. Thus women's and feminist groups are called to publicly support the strike but not to be its leading actors. It is wageworkers who should play the leading role, whether women or men. A general strike is understood as a working class political tool. Power relationships and conflicts among workers themselves remain in the background. On the other hand, it is assumed that employed women are able to go on strike if they want to do so. The
existence of different circumstances for women and men are not identified. All (wage) workers are the same.

When asking feminist groups to join their manifesto, women in trade unions were assuming that their political line was generally shared by most feminists. However, some feminist groups felt quite uncomfortable with it and preferred issuing their own. Thus, although there was unanimity in supporting the strike, there was not a consensus on the perceived problems or necessary claims. Despite the lack of a coordinated discourse alternative to women in trade unions', some share ideas can be mentioned. The following section will explore this in detail.

**Beyond markets. Is full employment desirable / possible?**

**A different set of problems**

Although there were many disagreements some common features can be identified. A primary conflict was a legacy of earlier trade union consent to the previous labour market deregulation measures and social benefits cuts. This conflict could be linked to the progressive institutionalisation of feminism and the increasing narrowing of trade union activities to the support of a privileged core of workers. Within both trends, a logic of asking just for feasible changes had become the logic of defending the rights of those already privileged, whether women or workers.

Basic disagreements over women's roles underlie this conflict. As an alternative manifesto stated: “This reform is not just related to unemployed people, it is not even just related to employment. Because it belongs to the establishment of a model of society where the economy, free market and corporations' benefits are put before any human need”. The use of the term needs must be highlighted, because it is not incidental. It is linked to the notion that the problem rests on a deeper conflict, which is the fundamental contradiction between the logic of accumulation and the logic of care. In a society where the former is privileged, life will always be threatened. Markets being the centrepiece of social and economic organisation push ensuring social provisioning into the background. This reform is a step forward in this sense.

On the other hand, there is a notion that markets, including labour market, operate on the basis of the unpaid work undertaken by women. Male workers themselves benefit from women's unpaid work. Women continue to keep on undertaking the socially needed unpaid work while they are entering the labour market. This social distribution of work is an alteration of the traditional male breadwinner / female caretaker model, which, nevertheless, keeps on with the idea that an employee must be free from any caring responsibilities. Feminist groups accuse trade unions of continuing to rely on this “clearly masculinised conception of the labour market” which invisibilises unremunerated work, exempts men of their responsibilities, and avoids challenging the crucial underlying conflict. The main problem is the very fact that Spanish society is guided by the logic of benefit. Hence markets themselves and all social groups that are favourably positioned within markets do not assume any responsibility in sustaining human life. This responsibility thus falls on groups with a disadvantageous market location. This social division is gendered as well as stratified by other power variables -race, origin, legal situation, class...

These feminists agreed with trade unions' feminists on the concrete foreseeable effects of the reform. The reform would undoubtedly be very harmful for women, given the precariousness of their employment conditions. But they also stressed that many women's work would not be affected by the reform. This is the case for women's unpaid work, women in the black economy, many freelance workers... The same figures that are used to emphasize the reasons for women supporting the strike can be used to explain why this strike had not been thought to defend women's working conditions. Unemployed women that are not receiving any benefit, women working in the informal sector and elderly women that cannot retire from housework... Most of these workers would not be affected by the strike because their working conditions are already
out of the scope of any regulation are women. Theirs is a struggle already lost or still not begun. But their experiences are not perceived when the focus is just formal paid labour. Nevertheless, feminist groups supported the strike. Although there was a consciousness that the reform was not aimed at defending the broad range of female workers, and that the deepest problems were not being addressed; there was also a notion that some women would undoubtedly be hurt, and that any collective response to further deregulation of the labour market should be supported.

Proposed solutions

In a society guided by the logic of accumulation, full high quality employment is neither possible nor desirable. On the one hand, it is not possible because of the dominant logic of accumulation that is always privileged over any other social objective. It means that any feminist discourse would be co-opted and its rhetoric would be used in a way that markets rather than women would finally benefit. This is the case with the debate about the reconciliation of family and working lives. Possible ways of reconciling them include flexibilising paid labour times, a fairer gender distribution of work, and increasing public services to care for children and other dependents. But what has is occurring is a greater flexibilisation that serves corporations’ interests instead of workers’ interests; an increase in private rather than public care services; and greater differences among women. Low-income women continue to face the problems of double burden and high and medium income women rely on the underpaid, often illegal, immigrants’ work. The conflict between working and family lives thus reaches a global dimension with the creation of transnational families. Migrated women cannot care for their families (who often remain in their home countries while some other woman -mother, sister, any neighbour- looks after them) while their work enable a Western woman -and of course, man- to attend her paid job. These global caring chains show the need to attend to differences among women and the complexity of power relationships. The economic system is not only the scene of a conflict between the working class and capitalists. An improved regulation of the labour market and a fairer distribution of work would not always be beneficial for all wageworkers. For example, men should have to increase their activity within households and medium-income couple should not be able to underpay a (immigrant) woman to look after their children. A gender redistribution of work is still a myth. Men’s time devoted to domestic labour accounts for just 2.68 hours a day versus women’s 4.78 hours. Full employment is itself a masculinist concept, relying on unpaid, unrecognised work. As feminist economists have argued, the post-IIWW times of full employment were based on the exploitation and deprivation of women, Third World countries and natural resources. Full employment is a hierarchical and exclusive mode of economic presence; hence it cannot apply to the whole society. On the other hand, the undesirability of full employment within the logic of capitalist production arises from the very fact that it would only apply to a privileged set of workers, marginalizing a whole range of people, mainly women, immigrants and young people.

The objective of the second group of feminists is no longer full (high quality?) employment but rather a shift in social priorities from accumulation to the sustainability of life, where work and wealth could be redistributed. This shift of social priorities necessarily implies a redistribution of collective responsibilities and a restructuring of the way in which life is sustained and needs are met. This shift may imply a profound questioning of values present in our daily lives, such as notions of economic in/inter/dependence. These statements do not constitute a fully developed alternative set of proposals at all. They are not much more than an intuitive rejection of a proposal that seems to be too easy, too rosy and too exclusive.

Is the general strike an adequate political tool for women?

Another crucial insight is the acknowledgement that the majority of women are excluded from generalised appeals to support the strike. Immigrants, informal workers, highly precarious workers, housewives, self-employed, sex workers... none of them can stop working and thus make a public statement of their political position. A general strike, as actually conceived, is not their political tool. And increasingly it is not many men’s adequate political tool, as the process
of feminisation of labour occurs. The non-execution of a huge amount of female work is simply not possible or could lead to negative consequences suffered only by the workers (women) themselves. No woman can tell her children, her disabled mother, her sick friend: “sorry, today I am going on strike and I can not take care of you.” No sex worker will stop working because the same people who refuse to legalise her work ask her for her support. It is too hard to ask any highly precarious employed lone mother to risk her job when no specific benefit aimed at lone mothers exists. Workers responsible of immaterial tasks would have to do tomorrow the work they have not done today. Another feminist group emerged from the debates about the strike—clearly stated it: "Struggle practices are out of step with work experiences" (Precarias a la Deriva, 2003:7).

However, these feminists supported the strike. They tried to make a more inclusive appeal, making references to the other side of a strike, which imply not consuming, not using services such as schools, the health system and public transportation. As the Women’s Secretary of another trade union (CGT) stated: “let’s stop all work -productive, caring, domestic and voluntary work”. The notion that a general strike does not only affect wagemakers, but the whole population is a common sense one. Nevertheless, such an inclusive appeal was only made by some feminists who were able to see beyond the boundaries of formal labour market. However, it did not resolve the problem. A deeper debate on which political tools could be more effective and inclusive is still to be made.

While these ideas were clear, a lack of a collective, unitary discourse became visible. Feeling uncomfortable with official and trade unions’ discourses is not enough. An example of this feeling can be found in those feminists who firstly met to decide a common response to the strike and then discovered that, instead of having any answer, they had lots of questions. From there they created a group called “Drifting Precarious Women”. They argue that precariousness is the common factor within the heterogeneity of women’s situations. Precariousness is a weak basis for collective struggle because of its many negative -vulnerability, insecurity, poverty...- and ambivalent -mobility, flexibility- implications. But some positive factors can also be recovered through a process of resistance. Starting from this common precarious location we should begin to share and understand our differences in order to: “[…] escape from neo-liberal fragmentation, which divides us, weakens us and turns us into victims […] . We want to facilitate the collective construction of different possibilities of living through a joint and creative struggle”

Finally, they understand precariousness as a phenomenon that not only refers to job conditions, but to a whole range of aspects such as: how the time is experienced, spaces, income, relationships and care, bodies... that is, those questions that have been pushed into the background by dichotomous and market-centred economic theoretical and political discourses.

A few concluding remarks

There seems to be a split in the feminist movement, although there is not a strict division, and arguments are continually mixed. On the one hand, there are feminists -within or closer to big institutions such as main trade unions or political parties- who hold a market-oriented discourse that identifies problems, solutions and political tools within the realm of labour market. On the other hand, feminists -mostly from non-institutional feminist groups- who do not agree with these ideas are starting a process of debate. It could be said that they are leading a process of shifting the attention from markets (specifically labour market) towards a broader perspective that could be linked to the explained focus on sustainability of life. The most visible conflicting issues are full employment and the reconciliation of family and working lives. Arguments on the advantages and the disadvantages of these proposals display the underlying assumption of the location which markets are granted within feminist discourse. Thus some similarities can be found between the deconstruction process that is taking place at a theoretical level and the political confrontations that became visible during the past general strike. These are alive and dynamic processes. New concepts, proposals, debates... are continuously emerging. There is a
need to stay alert of every new idea that can help us to move beyond a market-oriented society. This move would necessarily be the result of a constant feedback among different streams of feminist thought as well as among feminism within the academia and the feminist movement.

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1 One of the earliest studies is Govaerts (1969) and, with an explicit feminist commitment, Waring (1988). At present, these attempts to supply data whether in monetary figures or in terms of time continue to be a widespread topic in Feminist Economics research.

2 Note that hereafter the terms work and labour will often be used as if they were interchangeable. However, the term work has always more inclusive connotations, given that labour has more often been used by economic theory (Gardiner, 1997) and given that economic theory has historically been riddled with androcentric biases.

3 There are feminist economists who think that a distinctive element of caring labour is the nature of its motivation. A key author is Folbre who argues “caring labour is labour undertaken out of affection, or a sense of responsibility for other people, with no expectation of immediate pecuniary reward” (2001). Nevertheless, this concept would also transcend the benchmark of an activity being or not remunerated.

4 Understanding motivations for individual economic decisions is a different but nevertheless important task. Feminist economists challenge the androcentric rhetoric of interests that assumes that people (mostly men) are driven by self-interest within markets while they (mostly women) are driven by altruism within households (e.g. Hartmann and Folbre, 1988).

5 Data from Rodríguez Cabrero (2000).

6 I will mainly refer to the context of Madrid, so different questions could arise when looking to other places, for example, where employment and feminist issues intertwine with nationalist ones.

7 If no other indication is provided, data will hereafter refer to Encuesta de Población Activa, IV Trimestre, 2001.

8 The manifesto can be found in [http://www.izquierda-unida.es/informes/huelgageneral-20j/docs/20j-manifiesto_unitario_mujeres.pdf](http://www.izquierda-unida.es/informes/huelgageneral-20j/docs/20j-manifiesto_unitario_mujeres.pdf)

9 This manifesto can be found in [www.mujeresenred.net/20oj-manifiesto_feminista.html](http://www.mujeresenred.net/20oj-manifiesto_feminista.html)


11 Can be found in [http://www.sindominio.net/karakola/precarias_intro.htm](http://www.sindominio.net/karakola/precarias_intro.htm)

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