

## Women's (Dis) Empowerment in the Contemporary Discourse of Neoliberal Capitalism

### La (dés)autonomisation des femmes dans le discours contemporain du capitalisme néolibéral

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#### Abstract

The contemporary world has witnessed an unprecedented spread of feminist anti-patriarchal discourse that have narrowly perceived women's empowerment and liberation as a pure struggle against men for more commensurate economic opportunities and gender equality. This has brought about the incorporation of the female figure into the global institutions of the capitalist market as never before. Subsequently, in their quest for empowerment, women end up subject to the double burden of both productive and reproductive labor. Accordingly, this paper is an attempt to revisit the common orthodox perceptions of empowerment and resistance in the world of global capitalism. Endorsing a feminist political economic perspective represented by leading theorists and critics like, Maria Mies, Cynthia Enloe, Elizabeth Kammarck Minnich and others, this research is an attempt to engender the hegemonic capitalist 'knowledge' by exposing the suppressed 'exploitative' and 'oppressive' meanings that are attached to women's empowerment in the contemporary age of globalization. Furthermore, this paper is a contribution to the concurrent literature on feminist empowerment and resistance. It calls for an inclusive gender perspective to the understanding of neoliberal capitalism so as to pave the way to modes of resistance and

empowerment that subvert the dysfunctional meanings propagated by the system's neoliberal knowledge.

**Keywords:** Global capitalism- Feminist political economy- Empowerment- Resistance- Gender

### **Resumé**

Le monde contemporain a été témoin d'une propagation sans précédent du discours féministe anti-patriarcal qui a étroitement perçu l'autonomisation et la libération des femmes comme une lutte pure et simple contre les hommes pour des opportunités économiques plus proportionnées et l'égalité des sexes. Cela a entraîné l'intégration de la figure féminine dans les institutions mondiales du marché capitaliste comme jamais auparavant. Par la suite, dans leur quête d'autonomisation, les femmes finissent par être soumises au double fardeau du travail productif et reproductif. En conséquence, ce document tente de revoir les perceptions orthodoxes courantes de l'autonomisation et de la résistance dans le monde du capitalisme mondial. Soutenant une perspective économique politique féministe représentée par des théoriciennes et critiques de premier plan telles que Maria Mies, Cynthia Enloe, Elizabeth Kammarck Minnich et d'autres, cette recherche est une tentative d'engendrer le "savoir" capitaliste hégémonique en exposant les significations "exploitantes" et "oppressives" refoulées qui sont attachées à l'autonomisation des femmes à l'ère contemporaine de la mondialisation. En outre, ce document est une contribution à la littérature parallèle sur l'autonomisation et la résistance féministes. Il appelle à l'intégration d'une perspective de genre dans la compréhension du capitalisme néolibéral afin d'ouvrir la voie à des modes de résistance et d'autonomisation qui subvertissent les significations dysfonctionnelles propagées par les connaissances néolibérales du système.

*Mots clés:* Capitalisme mondial - Économie politique féministe - Autonomisation - Résistance - Genre

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## INTRODUCTION

“Economic equity is enormous empowerment of women. Having jobs that provide income means that women can be a more effective force, a more equal force, in the political process. Women with income take themselves more seriously and they are taken more seriously,” – **Betty Friedan**, feminist writer and activist.

“Give a woman a dollar, and she can put it to good use. Teach her about how money really works, and she can change the world,” – **Linda Davis Taylor**, CEO and Chairman of Clifford Swan Investment Counselors<sup>1</sup>.

Since the early emergence of feminism, it has grown as a cause reaching the four corners of the globe but revolving around one main quest, gender equality as an end in itself. From the very early ‘First Wave’ to the more recent ‘Fourth Wave’ feminism, feminist thought has been through serious challenges that range from fighting for basic rights of education to more complex ones of integrating women into the global market. ‘Where women are in the contemporary discourse of empowerment and self-realization in the age of neoliberal capitalism’ is a question that scholars and critics have no clear-cut answer for. In response to patriarchal oppression, many feminists, including Betty Friedan and Linda Davis Taylor have fought for creating more opportunities for women in the sphere of the market. The struggles of feminist movements have brought a considerable number of female

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<sup>1</sup> From yourstory.com website

figures like Angela Merkel, Hillary Clinton, and Ilhan Omar into the politico-economic scene. Furthermore, recent 2019 reports from the Morgan Stanley investment bank announced the rise of the "Sheconomy", which means that women are a global economic force in the contemporary world.

Although women are fundamental actors in the processes of capital accumulation that sustain neoliberal development, their role has always been concealed and suppressed in mainstream economics. What is theoretically said is that men are the breadwinners of the household, and women are the housewives and the caretakers. Practically, women are becoming a global economic force without which the system would perish. They are integrated in the neoliberal politico-economic agendas as never before. However, being integrated in the global market does not necessarily lead to more empowerment and freedom because women are being more and more exposed to the alienating and objectifying practices that ensure the accumulation of capital. This is a result of a lack of understanding of "the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism, in other words, the relationship between women's oppression and the exploitation and the paradigm of never-ending accumulation and 'growth'" (Mies 1). That is to say, most of the feminists' aspirations for liberation are trapped in and restricted to the female vs. male opposition. Actually, they are negligent to the overall system of capitalist patriarchy that absorbs and mutates their claims to gender equality into means through which women can unknowingly be perpetrators of the patriarchal ideology that they supposedly fight. Accordingly, this paper is a critical assessment of women's modes of resistance against the androcentric mainstream economic discourse of neoliberal capitalism. Endorsing a feminist political economic perspective represented by leading theorists and critics like, Maria Mies, Cynthia Enloe, Elizabeth Kammarck Minnich and others, this research is an attempt to engender the hegemonic capitalist 'knowledge' by exposing the suppressed 'exploitative' and 'oppressive' meanings that are attached to women's empowerment

in the contemporary age of globalization.

### 1. Feminist Political Economy

Feminist Political Economy (FPE) brings together two of the commonly most unbridgeable disciplines which are feminism and economics. It is defined by Riley as “the one among several heterodox economics that challenge the reigning orthodox neo-liberal economic model which emphasizes the market economy with growth and accumulation as its primary goals. FPE, in contrast, focuses on the provisioning of human needs and human well-being” (1). As a matter of fact, feminist political economy contributes to creating a gendered political economy in which “gender must be an essential basis for analysis” in a way that “can help us understand the inherently gendered structures that characterize our society,” and this is the first step towards rethinking the conventional feminist endeavors to break the fetters of patriarchal oppression (Cook et al. 3). FPE transcends the conventional micro- feminist discourses of man/woman economic equality to the macro level of the global economy and the questioning of the very objectives of the contemporary neoliberal notions of women’s liberty and freedom. Due to the failure of capitalist neoliberalism at the human level<sup>2</sup>, FPE attempts “to place economic activity at the service of human or people-centered development and not the other way around—to reach an era in which productivity and efficiency are achieved not for their own sake but as a way to increase collective wellbeing” (Beneria *Gender ...Mattered*88). Besides being transcendent to the orthodox feminist discourses, FPE raises many questions about how to overcome pure ‘economism’ in establishing more effective approaches and strategies to empowerment; not against patriarchy per se, but against the whole system that governs it.

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<sup>2</sup> Neoliberal capitalism is a failure at the human level, because it’s existence and persistence is dependent on the never-ending processes of capital accumulation and profit-realization at the expense of the human well-being and the limited natural resources.

## 2. Women and the Capitalist System: A History

Scrutinizing the history of women and the mainstream economy, as a part of gendering the manipulated discourse of resistance in the contemporary era of globalization, helps in tracing the invisibility of the economic value of women's unpaid work and reproductive roles. Furthermore, it shows the development of women's oppressive and exploitative integration into the sphere of the market in the name of gender equality and liberation. Actually, this process of historicization places the female within the context of the global economy, and this does not essentially reduce the analytical category of gender to the cause of the 'female'. This exposes how male-biased the modern mode of thought is, and how detrimental this has turned out not only for women, but also for men.

Since its estimated beginnings in the sixteenth century, the capitalist accumulation process has had the destruction of the human essence, and even more gravely women's lives and bodies, at its core. In fact, embracing the old assumptions of women's liberation about equal economic opportunities and the like has served to conceal the fact that the 'invisibility' of women's labor is prerequisite to the persistence of capital accumulation, and hence the survival of the system and its oppressive discourses of development. So, as Maria Mies puts it, "[T]he strategy of dividing the economy up into 'visible' and 'invisible' sectors is not at all new. It has been the method of the capitalist accumulation process since its beginning. The invisible parts were per definition excluded from the 'real' economy. But they constituted the very foundations for the visible economy" (17). Therefore, just like African, Latin, and Asian colonies represent invisible sites of capital resources for 'growth', women in the advanced industrial society are the cheapest and the most exploitable 'invisible' labor force.

## 3. Women in the Age of Neoliberal Capitalism: A Critique

### Wage Labor

“The rapid formation of a female labor force across the globe during the past decades has, to a great extent, been tied in particular to the growth of the service sector and of low-cost manufacturing, even though these have not been the only sectors behind the feminization of the labor force” (Beneria “Globalization and Gender...Global Economy” 155). The feminization of labor has reached unprecedented rates in the times of neoliberal capitalism, not because it is naturally cheap, but because it was manipulated and made cheap. Women who are thrown out of the formal sector of skilled workers are forced into the informal one as they are entrapped between the reduction of state expenditures on social welfare and the need to survive. Left out of options, women accept to work under any circumstances and for any wages. One of the striking cases are the twenty-first century garment factories that in order to “keep the factories globally attractive to the executives of Nike, North Face, Walmart, Mango, H&M, and Tommy Hilfi ger,” they “began to feminize their workforces” so as to keep wages low (Enloe 260). Actually, this applies to all of the system’s factories that produce for the realization of profit.

### **Domestic (Non-Wage) Labor**

Understanding the exploitation of women’s contribution to the so-called agendas of neoliberal capitalism does not stop at exposing the oppressive politics of wage labor. One cannot fathom the gendered rationality of growth without apprehending the system’s manipulation of non-wage labor in favor of its inhumane interests. The subversive idea of recognizing domestic labor as the basis for the amassment of capital was first raised in Italy by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James. In their book, *Women and the Subversion of the Community* (1971), Costa and James challenge not only the capitalist division of labor that categorizes housework as non-productive labor, but also the discourses of the left that, in their attempts to unpack the system’s vicious circle of accumulation, have failed to expose its repressed profiteering of domestic labor. Through their miniature experiences with the capitalist system in Italy, these two female critics have drawn new prospects

for feminist thought. They contend that “the challenge to the women’s movement is to find modes of struggle which, while they liberate women from the home, at the same time avoid on the one hand a double slavery and on the other prevent another degree of capitalistic control and regimentation” (Costa & James 2). Actually, this suggests the need for a holistic approach of liberation that transcends the seemingly subversive discourses that are entrapped within the circle of capitalist exploitation.

How does non-wage or domestic labor contribute to the continuous circle of capital accumulation and neoliberal ‘economic’ development is the crucial question that has been continuously repressed in the mainstream discourses, and hardly addressed in the counter resistive ones. Within the private sphere of the household of the advanced capitalist society, women are expected to perform the task of ‘reproduction’; a task that is not limited only to its biological connotations that include childbearing and nutrition as the word might imply. So, prerequisite to biological reproduction is social reproduction. Actually, preparing food, maintaining healthcare, and bearing responsibility for the children’s education and socialization are what ensure the reproduction of the labor force for the capitalist market.

#### **4. Gender and Resistance: Transgressing Boundaries**

The macropolitics of gender in the global era is purposively suppressed in mainstream economic discourses, and mistakenly overlooked in counter-resistive ones. *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s most influential work that attempts to offer an exegesis of globalization fails to endorse an inclusive gender perspective to transcend the dysfunctional meaning systems that sustain the growth and persistence of patriarchal capitalism. ‘Empire’ undermines the role of women both as passive contributors to the global economy, and as potential sites of change and resistance. Hardt and Negri built their explanation of the theory on the Foucauldian concept of ‘biopower’, which is “a form of power that regulates social life from its interior” (23-24). In other words, social reality is produced and

reproduced not only by ideological and repressive means, but also “in the body and with the body” (Hardt and Negri 27). That is to say, the subjects or individuals of ‘Empire’ increasingly interiorize the conduct of life proper to the capitalist ‘society of control’, as Hardt and Negri label it. This analysis, however, goes without examining the ways in which gender relations consistently configure the politics and the economy of the world.

Like Hardt and Negri’s Empire, Habermas’s theory of ‘Communicative Action’<sup>3</sup> is one of the many other works of social theory that, in their critical analysis of the system, overlook women’s contribution to its growth and persistence, and hence fail to create adequate solutions for the dilemmas of the contemporary world. One of the characteristic features that defines Habermas’s critique of capitalist rationalism is “a two-level concept of society that connects the “lifeworld” and “system” paradigms” (Habermas xl). As a matter of fact, Habermas’s distinction between the ‘lifeworld’ (as the context of social action and reproduction), and the ‘system’ (as the sphere of objects and material reproduction) corresponds to the modern capitalist differentiation between the activities that contribute to the process of material reproduction, and the ones that are associated with the process of ‘sociation’, or social reproduction. For instance, unlike childrearing and housework that belong to the realm of unpaid or ‘invisible’ labor, the production of objects for sale, consumption, and profit belong to the category of paid labor. Thus, the separation between the realms of the ‘system’ and the ‘lifeworld’ discursively, as in the prevalent anti-capitalist theories, or institutionally, as in the modern global neoliberal apparatuses, is merely ideological.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Communicative rationality’ is derived from Jurgen Habermas’s the theory of ‘Communicative Action’. The latter is built on the communicative aspect of social action. It emerged as a critique of the capitalist rationality, which is restricted to the teleological concept of social action, or in other words, the means/ends purposive rationality prevalent in the modern mode of life.

Reconsidering the relation between the two aforementioned realms from the gender dimension shows how contradictory the ideology that governs our understanding and perception of meanings is. For example, women's childbearing and nutrition are supposedly activities that are strictly social and do not contribute to the 'system', or material reproduction. However, and away from the discourse of the double exploitation of women's labor in favor of the vicious circle of accumulation, giving birth to children and taking care of their nourishment, health, education, and clothing requires the consumption of goods and services, like food, clothes, education fees, and medicaments. Similarly, as Fraser puts it, "the production of food and objects contributes to the biological survival of members of society. But it also, and at the same time, reproduces social identities. Not just nourishment and shelter simpliciter are produced but culturally elaborated forms of nourishment and shelter that have symbolically mediated social meanings" (116). The meanings that establish the link between the 'system' and the 'lifeworld', between paid and unpaid labor, between the feminine and the masculine are repeatedly obscured because they threaten to bring up new perceptions of the meanings that are enclosed to the so-called purely economic neoliberal mode of thought and knowledge.

The reason behind the invisibility of women's labor in the global stage is their identification with the domestic and the national (Enloe 352), and this contributes to maintaining and bolstering the contemporary androcentric neoliberal conception of women's self-realization and empowerment. Minnich, geniusly, draws attention to the idea that "turning nouns into verbs...forms "gender" into "gendering"", and this helps us "remember human agency...by focusing our attention not on static things, ...but, rather, on the processes, histories, and complexly interrelating systems that create and sustain so much of our world" (11). Hence, turning the static into the active enables us to question and reconsider our perception of the various narratives

about the legitimacy and the unavoidability of the neoliberal mainstream discourse, and the pure economic rationality it breeds from a gender perspective.

Herbert Marcuse's political and philosophical assumptions about feminism and gender, as its major object of thought, adds to the importance of the gender perspective that this research necessitates revisiting the one-dimensional economic approach to the issue of resistance and empowerment. It also calls for reviving what Michelle Foucault calls 'subjugated knowledges'<sup>4</sup> that can bring about qualitative and effective social change. In his lecture, "Marxism and Feminism", at the University of California, Marcuse emphasizes the importance of feminist agendas that transcend the essentialist opposition between the male and the female, because what lies "beneath and beyond the male-female dichotomy is the human being, common to male and female: the human being whose liberation, whose realization is still at stake" ("Marxism and feminism" 281). Similarly, David Harvey, in his *A Companion to Marx's Capital*, maintains that "the gender dimension is now recognized as being highly significant," since the accumulation of capital has always "entailed a radical disempowerment of women, their reduction to the status of property ...and the reinforcement of patriarchal social relations" (304-5). This is the very basic of the feminist agenda that this research adopts under the label of feminist political economy in order to address the issue of women's empowerment in the era of global neoliberalism.

'The personal is international / The international is personal' is one of the most disruptive phrases to the national/international binarism that perpetuates the repression of the contribution of women's productive and reproductive forces to the global capitalist market. That is to say, things, like the most personal relationships,

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<sup>4</sup> 'Subjugated knowledges' refer to "disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchize and order them in the name of some arbitrary idea of what constitutes" mainstream thought and knowledge (Foucault 83)

housewives, and unpaid services, all matter in today's gendered international politics of the model of neoliberal development. Cynthia Enloe, one of the most skilled feminists in making women's everyday lives visible in the multilayered international neoliberal politics, shows how "relations between governments depend not only on capital and weaponry but also on the control of women as symbols, consumers, workers, and emotional comforters" (XXII). Introducing her book of contemporary international politics, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, with stories of two famous historical female figures, Pocahontas and Carmen Miranda, Enloe, astonishingly, uncovers a whole new dimension from which we can get an exegesis of the workings of neoliberal politics.

Pocahontas, the Indian daughter of a tribal chief, performed the role of an intermediary between the men of her tribe and the English colonizer. Manipulated by the idea that the colonizer is on a mission of spreading growth and prosperity to impoverished places like her homeland, she marries one of the English settlers, travels to England, and ironically ends up dying with the "civilization's coal dust in her lungs" (Enloe XXI). More recently, the famous South-American Hollywood star, Caramen Miranda is one of the pioneer female victims whose body was used to promote Brazilian industry and consolidate politico-economic relations with North America. Thinking about these women's lives makes us question the one-dimensionality<sup>5</sup> of neoliberal international politics and development. Actually, nowadays, the same process of exploiting women takes place, not through direct colonization, but by means of cruel policies of investment and privatization under the alibi of 'development'. De facto, because keeping up with the pace of the

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<sup>5</sup> Herbert Marcuse's the "One-Dimensional Man" and the "One-Dimensional Society" describe another facet of totalitarianism; one that is not so much associated with fascism and communism as much as it is with "the mechanisms through which consumer capitalism integrates individuals into its world of thought and behavior" (Kellner "Introduction" xii).

amassment of capital and the realization of profit is impossible for human bodies as well as the planet, women experience the damaging consequences of the system's dehumanizing processes.

The idea of the women's or the wife's responsibility for social reproduction goes beyond the private sphere of the household to include developing social networks and linkages that, directly or indirectly, contributes to the various processes of the amassment of capital. In her conception of the idea of 'diplomatic wives', Cynthia Enloe contends that "The conduct of international relations between governments has relied on women in their roles as wives. Marriage is domestic, but it is also national and international. The gendered politics of marriage inform the gendered politics of international relations" (178). Thus, "[t]he home is the domain of the wife. The domestic duties of foreign service wives include creating an atmosphere where man from different states can get to know one another" (185), and as "[o]ne male diplomat explained: 'Quite frankly, it is only by meeting people socially that you get the sort of relationship that you are seeking. You'll never establish it just going to visit people in their offices'" (188). Thus, while women's productive and reproductive roles are fundamental to the dynamics of the neoliberal economic 'growth', they are continuously concealed and entrapped into a gendered division of labor that represses women's dehumanizing contribution to the to the persistence of the capitalist system.

The gendered division of labor into the individualistic categories of 'wage labor' and 'domestic labor' is built on the notions of 'use value' and 'exchange value'. In other words, the intensification of the forces of industrialization has led to the increasing separation between the unpaid reproductive housework that has a 'use value', and the paid productive work that has an 'exchange value'. Actually, the manipulated language of gender equality and empowerment in the discourse of neoliberal capitalism manifests itself not only in the market and the household as separate spheres of capital realization. Rather, and in the name of reducing the high

rates of unemployment and poverty, the politics of neoliberal development subjects women, concomitantly, to the double burden of both the household and the market through the microenterprises that targets developing countries such as India, Mexico, and Bangladesh. Microenterprise projects are small businesses that are administered by women. This equals gender equality to economic competitiveness and blurs the historical and political dimension of the category of gender. In addition to these small economic projects, and under another variation of domestic work in the advanced capitalist society, "domestic workers constitute one of the globalized economy's major employment activities...Thousands of women migrate internationally to clean other people's homes" (Enloe 306). Subsequently, women become the subject of the double burden of both reproductive and productive tasks.

## CONCLUSION

The capitalist system's survival and persistence throughout the centuries has been dependent on the generation and perpetuation of a discourse that subjugates the essence of the human being, in general, and women, in specific, to its oppressive and dehumanizing meanings. In the contemporary age of global neoliberal capitalism, significant concepts like women's resistance, empowerment, and liberation have been subject to a discursive manipulation in favor of the system's interests of the never-ending accumulation and profit realization. Consequently, and in their conventional feminist quests to free themselves from the fetters of patriarchy, women end up falling into its exploitative discourse that bolsters the system's domination and intensifies women's oppression in the name of liberty and empowerment.

Hardt and Negri's 'Empire' and Habermas's theory of 'Communicative Action' are two of the many critical and theoretical attempts to unravel the concealed oppressive workings of neoliberal capitalism. Despite the fact that they represent a prominent anti-capitalist discourse, they fail to endorse a holistic perspective that

takes gender as one of its crucial pillars of analysis. Subsequently, contemporary feminist critics have established the tenets of feminist political economy; a concept that administer the multiplicity of causes that range from simple everyday life practices to others that are related to the macro-global level. Boundaries that have long been established by the system are now being questioned and revisited.

Feminist political economy has produced an inclusive anti-neoliberal capitalist discourse that breaks and transcends binary oppositions like invisible domestic labor vs. visible wage labor and productive vs. reproductive tasks. This has resulted in exposing the dysfunctional meanings that are attached to major concepts, like women's empowerment and resistance in the global era of neoliberal capitalism. Uncovering the contradictory and exploitative nature of neoliberal politics of women's empowerment paves the way to the gradual reconfiguration of our perception and understanding of the world we live in and the system that governs it.

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