

Is globalisation good for women?

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PLIT 10075 THE GLOBAL POLITICS OF SEX AND GENDER

‘I believe capital as it functions now depends on and exacerbates racist, patriarchal,
and heterosexist relations of rule’

Mohanty 2003:510

If globalisation is seen as a process of neoliberal ‘global restructuring’ in which ‘masculinity’-fueled, growth-oriented market fundamentalism leads to privatisation and the ‘feminisation’ of labor and migration, it would be difficult not to acknowledge the harmful impacts that it has had on women, especially on those living in the ‘Two-Thirds World.’ Assessing the impact of neoliberal globalisation on women requires seeing gender as both an empirical category, meaning women in this particular case, and an analytical category ‘that constitutes a governing code’ (Peterson 2009:37). After defining neoliberal globalisation and questioning ‘women’ as a monolithic category, this essay takes a feminist GPE approach and draws on Mohanty’s (2003) post-colonial and trans-national analysis to examine the gendered nature of global restructuring and its impact on gendered norms and bodies, the ‘differences’ and intersectional aspects of globalisation, and the ‘micro-politics of subjectivity and struggle.’ Recognising that the effects of globalisation are ‘often contradictory and rife with tensions’ (Beneria 2003:164), and that truly giving agency to women requires more complex roles than the victim/heroine dichotomy allows for, this essay is wary of simplistic narratives of globalisation such as ‘some jobs are better than no jobs,’ rather questioning the deeper structures of global neoliberalism and feminization. This essay thus sees the current phase of globalization and neoliberal capitalism as inextricably linked, although it does not deny the future existence of other, more equitable and feminist globalisations in light of the ‘crisis of masculinity’ posed by the 2008 financial crisis.

Globalisation today entails a series of economic, political and cultural transformations underpinned by one hegemonic (albeit contested) ideology: neoliberal capitalism. Although it is not possible to separate the different components of globalisation, due to space constraints this essay focuses on the economic aspects of neoliberal globalisation. The standard neoliberal, 'Washington consensus' view promoted by mass media and international financial institutions defines globalisation as a process of increased global integration achieved primarily through economic policies such as openness to trade and investment; a positive, gender-neutral process which stimulates growth and promotes self-interest (Held and Kaya 2007:1). Placing the start of the current phase of globalisation at the demise of Bretton Woods in the 1970s, the neoliberal account is unattentive to the wider history of globalisation and the (gendered) legacies from the (colonial) past that it continues to enjoy and in many instances reinforce, as Ong's (1987:11-37) study of the proletarianization of rural Malaysian woman has shown. On the other hand, although critical GPE scholars such as Held and Kaya (2007:1) have claimed that 'globalisation underlies global disparities,' they have mostly failed, together with the neoliberal mainstream, to acknowledge the gendered nature of globalisation. Because it 'positions and affects men and women differently, and it produces new modes of gender power and disadvantage' that celebrate masculine-constructed characteristics and devalue feminine-constructed ones, neoliberal globalisation is a gendered and gendering phenomenon (Peterson and Runyan 2014:181, Hawkesworth 2006:2). Lastly, although women are differently affected by globalisation, and postmodern feminists have questioned the usefulness of categories such as 'women,' the current norms have not only proven to be especially harmful to (poor) women, but are constituted according to gendered dichotomies such as public/private, production/reproduction, skilled/unskilled (Peterson et al. 2014:188, Steans 2013:161).

Labour markets provide a good starting point when looking at the 'concrete effects of global restructuring on [the] bodies of women' and at the gendered nature of global norms (Mohanty 2003:516). As Razavi et al. (2012:v) have pointed out, 'labour markets do not operate in a vacuum': they are social institutions 'shaped by social norms and power inequalities.' Global neoliberalism's preference for trade liberalisation, public sector reform, flexibilisation of employment, and relocation of manufacturing is not gender-neutral either in its formulation nor in its impacts. In fact,

these policies are part of what feminist GPE scholars since Guy Standing (1989) have called the ‘feminization’ of labour, a material but also conceptual transformation of labour markets which entails both the increase of women in ‘formal’ work and the construction of female workers as ‘docile,’ ‘nimble-fingered,’ and ‘disposable’ (Elias and Ferguson 2015:189-191). That this ‘femininity’ is constructed by employers is illustrated by Salzinger’s (2004:46) study of the Juárez maquila industry, which shows how femininity continues to structure production even in the absence of women. Thus, the growth in women’s paid employment globally, seen as empowering for women by international institutions such as the World Bank (World Bank 2015:2), has also been followed by the normalization of flexible, informal and secondary jobs and an almost unchallenged gender pay gap. The example of women workers in the garment sector in Bangladesh, which accounts for 80% of Bangladesh export earnings and has been reliant on Export Processing Zones (EPZs), subcontracting by Multinational Corporations (MNCs), and home-working, shows how the ‘feminization’ of labour can lead to events such as the collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013 (Elias and Ferguson 2015:187-8,194). In light of the unequal relations of production that prevail, whether ‘some jobs are better than no jobs’ as argued by Acker (2004:35) becomes highly questionable.

The ‘feminization’ of labour has been accompanied by the worsening of the gendered division of labour into the productive and reproductive spheres. Partially imposed by Western countries on many cultures beginning in the fifteenth century (Peterson and Runyan 2014:189, Acker 2004:23), the productive/reproductive divide has been exacerbated by the movement toward privatisation promoted by neoliberal globalisation, as exemplified by the infamous Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) and by many of the post-2008 crisis austerity measures. Neoliberalism promotes the primacy of the market, seeing the state as a ‘night watchman’ with minimal functions of defence and public order; but privatisation ‘has not generated the economic benefits promised,’ raising prices and worsening service delivery (Hawkesworth 2006:18-19). Banks have been bailed out, while care has been individualised. Even the pro-establishment Foreign Affairs journal has been critical of the retreat of the public sector promoted by neoliberal globalisation, although still buying into ‘growth’ and ‘good governance’ narratives while ignoring inequality and the realities of reproductive labour (Birdsall and Fukuyama 2011). The 2008 crisis has

seen the rise of the 'social investment state' theory, which sees the state as an investor replacing the 'nursing' welfare state. However, despite its 'feminist potential,' it prioritises market oriented objectives and reminds of Amartya Sen's analysis of development, in which (poor) adult women are sidelined in favor of child-centred policies, motherhood becomes naturalised, and the privatisation of care becomes institutionalised through mechanisms such as microcredits (Sen ;Razvari 2013:222-3). Conversely, Hawkesworth (2006:20-22) has argued that 'neoliberal privatization contributes to a regendering of the state,' delegitimising social welfare agencies and imposing a 'reproductive tax' on many women. By 'slashing social services,' women's reproductive labor becomes more burdensome as the public sector abandons its previous responsibilities (Peterson and Runyan 2014:199). As housework becomes more demanding, those women that can afford it subcontract domestic work to other women, creating what has been called the 'maid-trade,' in which intersectional aspects of class, race and migratory status unfold.

Women are on the move. When talking about international migration, the conventional global North/South divide becomes problematic as both operate in relation to each other, bringing intersectionality and difference into play. As Herrera's study of Ecuadorian domestic workers in Madrid (2008) has shown, migration politics and social reproduction patterns in the global North work in relation to reproductive labour needs and migration into the global South. Moreover, although not all women migrate to do domestic work (Kofman et al. 2000:15-17), 'transnational strategies of social reproduction in globalization' such as labor-recruitment programmes fuel women from diverse social and occupational backgrounds into (paid) reproductive labor; 'globalisation's high-end jobs breed low-paying jobs' (Herrera 2008:103; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007:x-xi, xix). By 'empowering' women in the global North through the labour of women from the global South, the transnational commodification of care has shown the inexorable (and hierarchized) links between the productive and the reproductive economies, challenging the productive/reproductive binary but ultimately leaving men's role unchallenged (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007:23). Migrant women, many times skilled, are relegated to do the 'invisible work,' often facing 'abusive and exploitative working conditions' (Hawkesworth 2006:16; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003:9). They hold a contradictory position in Sassen's (2009:1-4) 'global city', maintaining a 'strategic

infrastructure' while becoming the equivalent of an 'offshore proletariat, with its lack of power and political visibility.' In refusing to 'normalize traditional women's services', negative tropes are perpetuated and migrant women become 'colonized,' feeding into 'corporate claims to non-responsibility for reproduction' (Agustin 2003:392; Acker 2004:17).

Inequality has widened with neoliberal globalisation, and migratory/citizenship status has become a new factor together with gender, class and race to be taken into account when looking at intersectionality in a globalised world. The 'feminization' of migration, part of what Castles and Miller (1998:8-9) have called the transformation of migration into a 'private solution to a public problem,' has entailed both an increase of women migrants and a 'loss of physical security, political rights and rights to bodily integrity' (Hawkesworth 2006:22). Citizenship status thus becomes key in the intersecting and mutually constituting axes of inequality and experience. This does not mean that immigration substitutes class or race as intersectional factors but, together with discourses of 'color-blind' society (as seen in the US), manages to cover them (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007:14). Subordination is created through the 'feminization' of the migrant, which occurs both in the process of migration and in the access to the labour market, as outlined above. As citizenship becomes increasingly conditional on formal employment, many women migrants working in the reproductive economy are discriminated against (Kofman et al. 2000:197). But there are connections and commonalities within difference which help to avoid 'colonising' and 'cultural relativist' narratives (Mohanty 2003:505,509). The connections within difference are evident: the globalisation of childcare and housework has brought 'ambitious and independent women of the world together,' not in the second-wave 'sisterhood' model, but as 'mistress and maid, employer and employee' (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003:9). The commonalities, on the other hand, are found on the 'bottom line': as Hochschild (2009:2) argues, 'in the end both First and Third world women are small players in a larger economic game whose rules they have not written.' But that does not mean they are not able to play.

Agustin (2003:391) has raised the difficult question of whether 'to pay attention only to the jobs migrants do is to essentialize them as workers and to deny the diversity of their hopes and experiences.' By looking at what Mohanty (2003:501,

508-9) has called the 'micro-politics of context, of subjectivity and struggle,' this essay intends to go beyond a narrow 'women as workers' focus and to question the narratives of globalisation as a 'whirlwind descending upon us' (Salzinger 2004:57). Recognising the many accounts of global restructuring that exist, the local/global divide becomes questionable, as both 'exist simultaneously and constitute each other' (Mohanty 2003:521). Salzinger (2004:43) has called to see globalization as 'less linear, obdurate and inevitable than many theories suggest,' and together with Govender (2008:172-173) has called to acknowledge the exercise of power (subject-making) in which we engage on a daily basis, in contrast to the idea of power always residing 'elsewhere.' Thus, Ong (1987:220-221) has illustrated how factory women in Malaysia used spiritual possession as a strategy not only to express their anguish but to resist ideological domination from outside, and cultural delegitimation from inside, redefining 'the meaning of morality.' Likewise, Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007:22-25) has pointed out in her study of migrant 'nannies' how, by becoming 'transnational mothers,' they are able to 'redefine the standards of good mothering' by 'setting themselves against the negative models of mothering they see in others,' i.e. their employers. Similarly, many migrant women assert their power by migrating, which puts into question simplistic 'push and pull' structural theories of migration as single explanations for women to migrate; non-economic, personal factors such as escaping from an oppressive husband can also play a role in deciding to migrate (Kofman et al. 2000:195; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003:10). Power and subject-making in globalisation is not unidirectional, and everyday women have developed coping mechanisms and strategies of resistance to the neoliberal era.

As Mohanty (2003:513) has pointed out, paying attention to the 'everyday experiences' of (poor) women can illuminate the 'macropolitics of global restructurings.' But women's everyday experiences worldwide are not always part of 'anticapitalist struggles,' as Mohanty assumes, and this view falls in the victim/heroine dichotomy that this essay has tried to avoid. In her study of Mexican maquiladoras, Ellis (2008:47) has argued that consumer practices can also be 'sites of agency and empowerment' and not mere manipulation from outside, a resistance similar to Foucault's 'resistance within power.' By appropriating 'femininity' through the use of colorful clothes, maquiladoras collectively reconstitute 'the global processes that determine what shape their bodies should be in after a long day's work'

(Ellis 2008:45). This appropriation is however double-sided, selectively accepting exploitative global economic and cultural systems that devalue 'femininity' while creating strategies of endurance. The examples in the last two paragraphs show how there are gaps between neoliberal globalisation aspirations and accomplishments, gaps that have been broadened (and subsequently narrowed down again) after the 2008 financial crisis. Crisis, as Bedford and Rai (2010:12) argue, are 'Janus-faced moments of reflection and potentiality,' and although 'asymmetries of power are significant in the selection of crisis-interpretations and their translation into crisis-responses,' the micro-politics of context represented by women's everyday experiences will continue to illuminate and reshape the global.

Globalisation is not a gender-neutral process. Seeing neoliberal capitalism at the heart of the current phase of globalisation, this essay has argued that its gendered norms and impacts have been mostly detrimental for women. The privatising, individualising, and free market agenda of neoliberal globalisation has fostered the feminization of labor and migration, and has led to the transnational commodification of care. Feminization has worked as a normalizing ideology that devalues feminine-constructed characteristics, justifying the worsening conditions of an increased number of women migrants and workers. Moreover, the gap between the productive and reproductive spheres has been widened by the retreat of the state, and intersectional elements such as citizenship status have come into play as some women have subcontracted their 'traditional' reproductive roles to migrant women, leaving men's role unchallenged. But women are more than workers, and neoliberal globalisation cannot be fully understood without looking at women everyday experiences, their coping mechanisms and resistances, the links between the global and the local. Avoiding narratives of 'we are better than we used to be' and 'some jobs are better than no jobs,' the recent phenomena of global neoliberalism and feminization have shown little positive impacts. Due to the restricted length of this essay, some key issues such as gender and development (GAD) or gender and 'good' governance have been omitted, although crucial to a rounded understanding of the current phase of neoliberal globalization and its impacts on women. As Govender (2008:170) has noted, 'the empowerment of women depends upon going beyond gender neutrality and neoliberal governance.' The struggle continues.

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