*Corresponding Author's Email: gloriapiamalandra@gmail.com
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What Accounts for Gender Inequalities in "Developing" Countries? A Decolonial Feminist Analysis of Patriarchy, Coloniality, and Neoliberalism

Gloria Pia Malandra

University College Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

Despite decades of international gender equality frameworks, substantial gender disparities persist in the Global South, where progress toward parity remains over a century away at current rates. This paper argues that these inequalities *cannot* be adequately explained by cultural or developmental factors alone; they are the product of three historically and structurally integrated forces. Drawing primarily on evidence and case studies from Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, it contends that gender inequality in these contexts is produced by: (1) entrenched patriarchal norms that marginalise women across education, labour markets, healthcare, and political participation; (2) colonial interventions that did not merely encounter pre-existing patriarchies but actively reconfigured and intensified gender hierarchies, embedding racialised and gendered systems of domination that persist today; (3) and neoliberal restructuring, imposed through structural adjustment programs (SAPs), which has perpetuated these inequalities by privileging market production while invisibilising and overburdening women's unpaid reproductive labour. By integrating postcolonial feminist critique with structural economic analysis, the paper offers a multi-causal framework that moves beyond single-axis accounts of gender inequality. It argues that meaningful progress requires dismantling not only cultural norms but the global economic architecture that continues to reproduce women's marginalisation.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Patriarchy, Coloniality of Gender, Neoliberal Development, Decolonial Feminism

1. Introduction

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) asserts that "*all* human beings are born free and equal"[1] and prohibits *any* discrimination based on "race, colour, *sex*, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."[2] In the field of gender equality, this framework has been fortified through the enactment of international agreements such as the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of*

[1] United Nations General Assembly, 1948, Art. 1; emphasis added.
[2] United Nations General Assembly, 1948, Art. 2; emphasis added.

Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)[3] in 1979 and the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* in 1995.[4] These agreements reiterate the formal principles of equality enshrined in the UDHR while articulating a comprehensive agenda to ensure women's equal access to public life, healthcare, education, and employment. International organisations such as UN Women and global aid programs, including primarily the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[5] have sought to reduce gender disparities in access to opportunities. These initiatives, combined with the gradual incorporation of gender equality principles into domestic legal systems, have contributed to measurable progress. However, the *substantive* reality of gender inequality remains unacceptable: at the current pace, reaching full parity will take an estimated 123 years (World Economic Forum, 2025, 5).

Notably, the data underscores that gender divides are particularly pronounced in "developing" nation-states, including Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. In contemporary development discourse, the very distinction between "developed" and "developing" remains an enduring — if deeply problematic — measure of progress. While conventionally "a *developed* country is defined as one with high per capita products",[6] high standards of living, and advanced infrastructure (Kuznets, 1968, 97), *by contrast*, the *developing* ones continue to be defined in terms of overall low welfare indicators, i.e., low GDP per capita, poverty, malnutrition, and disparities in health and education (Hoffmeister, 2020, 15).[7] When it comes to gender inequality, a glance at the Global Gender Gap Index by the World Economic Forum (2025, 8, 11) reproduces the "developed"/"developing" dichotomy: the Nordic European territories of Iceland, Finland, and Norway claim the podium, having respectively reached 92.6%, 87.9%, and 86.3% of gender parity. Conversely, Chad (57.1%), Sudan (57.0%), and Pakistan (56.7%) occupy the three lowest ranks among the 148 economies covered. Such classifications, though empirically descriptive, expose the persistence of a global hierarchy coded through gender, racial, and economic inequalities.

Against this background, and while acknowledging "developing" as a term that is both analytically convenient and ideologically fraught, this paper wants to ask: *what forces sustain such (greater) gender inequality within these so-called developing contexts?*

Here, the question is addressed through a feminist and decolonial analytical lens.

This paper is positioned as a theory-illustrating conceptual synthesis grounded in a critical review of feminist political economy, postcolonial and decolonial feminist theory, and development scholarship. Its purpose is to demonstrate the explanatory reach of a three-force framework comprising: (a) *Patriarchy*, that is, the system of social relations and institutional structures (re)producing gendered hierarchies across political, economic, and social spheres (Nash, 2020); (b) *Coloniality of Gender*, that is, the enduring imposition and reproduction of gendered and racialised hierarchies through (neo)colonial logics that continue to structure power, knowledge, and social relations in the postcolonial present (Lugones, 2007, 2008); and

[3] United Nations General Assembly, 1979.

[4] United Nations, 1995.

[5] With a focus on neoliberal policies, the controversial effects of development interventions will be further explored in Section (4).

[6] Emphasis added.

[7] "Developing" countries and economies comprise Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia (excluding Israel, Japan, and the Republic of Korea), and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) (UNCTAD, 2023). It should be noted that this classification does not map precisely onto the WEF Gender Gap Index rankings cited in this paper, which employ a different country-level methodology; the two frameworks are used here as complementary rather than coterminous.

(c) *Neoliberal Restructuring*, that is, the reorganisation of Global South economies around market production, fiscal retrenchment, and export dependency, whose central gendered mechanism is housewifisation: the historical and ongoing process through which women's labour is constructed, confined, and *naturalised* as *unpaid* domestic work within the household, thereby devaluing their participation in both formal and informal economies (Mies, 1986).

It is the conjunction of these three forces, and above all their sequence, that answers the comparative form of the question posed above. None of the three is peculiar to the Global South taken singly. Patriarchal norms are, on the account reconstructed in section (2), near-universal, and neoliberal restructuring reorganised welfare states and labour markets in the North as thoroughly as it did economies in the South. What is specific is the order in which they arrived and the manner in which each hardened the residue of the last. Patriarchal norms furnished a cultural substrate; colonial administration then converted that substrate into codified law and titled property, granting it an enforceability it had not previously possessed and stripping out the plural, negotiable, and in places gynocentric arrangements documented in section (3); and neoliberal restructuring subsequently encountered these economies not as peers but as suppliers within a global division of labour, where the legally hardened availability of women's labour could be realised as a comparative advantage. Northern economies underwent the first and third of these processes; they administered rather than absorbed the second. The claim advanced here is therefore not that gender inequality is greater in these contexts because their cultures are "more patriarchal" — a proposition this paper explicitly rejects in section (3) — but that a differential arises wherever patriarchal norms have been legally codified by an external power and are subsequently monetised from a subordinate position within the world economy.

The significance of engaging with critical feminist approaches stems from the traditional focus of development studies and political theory on *the male experience* in the public realm (Celis *et al.,* 2013). Accordingly, they have often neglected gender as an appropriate political vantage point and have actively invisibilised women's issues and their (potential) agendas by relegating them to a *depoliticised* private sphere (Waylen, 1996). To address this marginalisation, the paper demonstrates how "the personal is political" across three analytical sections (Hanisch, 1970). Section (2) reconstructs Western feminist discourse on entrenched patriarchal norms and examines how these values account for gender gaps in literacy rates, socio-economic status, health equality, and political participation, with a regional emphasis on Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. Building on this, section (3) problematises Western feminism's assumptions of a "universal" sisterhood by introducing insights from post- and decolonial feminism; these will illuminate how the experience of colonialism in developing nations has engendered or exacerbated pre-existing gender asymmetries that keep exploiting women to sustain the global system of capital accumulation. Finally, section (4) expands on (3) by showcasing how neoliberal structural adjustment programs (SAPs) have reframed and deepened gender inequality by exploiting their low-wage participation in global markets.

This paper makes three main contributions. *First*, it aims to advance a multi-causal framework that conceptualises gender inequality as the product of interacting structural forces, rather than *isolated* cultural factors. While scholars such as Mohanty (2003), Lugones (2007, 2008), and Mies (1986) have each illuminated individual dimensions of this problem, their analyses have typically foregrounded one axis — cultural, colonial, *or* economic — at the expense of the others. By bringing all three into a single framework, this paper shows how each force compounds and enables the others. *Second*, it integrates post- and decolonial feminist theory into standard analyses of development, highlighting the historical foundations of contemporary inequalities. *Third*, it provides a critical account of neoliberal development policies, demonstrating how SAPs have reproduced and intensified gendered forms of economic marginalisation.

Table 1. The three-force framework: mechanisms, pathways, and points of interaction.

Force	Core mechanism	Principal pathways to gender inequality	Discussed in
Patriarchy (Nash, 2020)	Socialisation into masculinity and femininity organises a public/private divide and naturalises women's assignment to reproduction.	Gendered educational investment and early marriage; unpaid care burden and occupational segregation; constrained autonomy over health and childbirth; party gatekeeping and masculinist political institutions.	Section 2
Coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2007, 2008)	Colonial rule racialises and codifies gender hierarchy, converting plural customary arrangements into formalised male legal authority.	Codification of protectionist personal-status law; male-titled cash-crop and land regimes; heterosexualist legal orders; the "civilising" narrative that legitimises intervention.	Section 3
Neoliberal restructuring, operating through housewifisation (Mies, 1986)	Market production is privileged while reproductive labour is invisibilised, treated as infinitely elastic, and absorbed as a free input.	Austerity transfers state provision onto the household; feminised, wage-suppressed export employment; confinement to subsistence agriculture; care-conditioned social transfers.	Section 4
Interaction	Each force supplies the conditions that the next exploits.	Patriarchal norms furnish the cultural substrate; colonial codification hardens it into enforceable law and property; neoliberal restructuring converts it into a cost advantage within global production.	Sections 3–4; Conclusion

1.1 Methodology

The study does not undertake primary empirical research; instead, it engages with empirically grounded peer-reviewed studies situated in three regions of the so-called developing Global South, i.e., Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. These regions are approached as illustrative case sites, selected on the criteria set out below; the selection follows the phenomenon rather than sampling for variation and makes no claim to statistical or regional representativeness. While the three regions share *particular* historically sedimented conditions — including *imposed* (neo/post) colonialism, economic dependency, and racialised cultural subordination — they are marked by *significant* internal variation both within and across regions and are emphatically *not* treated as standing in for a singular or homogeneous "Global South" experience, a notion which is explicitly rejected here. Instead, the cases are mobilised to trace *recurring* patterns of gendered inequality while remaining attentive to contextual specificity, divergence, and difference, including through the deliberate incorporation of counter-cases where these complicate or qualify broader tendencies. Aggregate indices and cross-national datasets are used descriptively to contextualise broader patterns and trends. At the same time, it is fundamental to acknowledge that the developed/developing taxonomy upon which many such measures rely is itself among the objects of this paper's critique. For consistency, the paper uses "developing" only where reproducing the taxonomy of the sources or institutions under discussion, marking it as their term rather than the paper's own; "Global South" denotes a shared position within the world economy produced by colonial and neocolonial relations, rather than a geographical or developmental category; and named regions or states are used wherever the claim is specific enough to permit it.

The literature underpinning this synthesis was assembled through a structured but deliberately non-systematic search, appropriate to a conceptual rather than a systematic-review contribution. Searches were conducted in JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, supplemented by targeted retrieval from the repositories of the ILO, UNCTAD, UN Women, UNRISD, and the World Bank, combining the terms "gender inequality", "patriarchy", "coloniality of gender", "decolonial feminism", "structural adjustment", "social reproduction", "unpaid care", "export processing zones", and "land rights" with each of the three regional descriptors. Priority was given to peer-reviewed monographs and journal articles; institutional statistical sources were retained only where they supply indicators

unavailable in the scholarly literature, and grey literature only where it documents legislative or programmatic developments too recent to have been treated in peer-reviewed work. No date restriction was applied, since the argument requires both foundational theoretical texts and contemporary empirical evidence. The three regional cases were then selected against three criteria: (i) documentary density, that is, the availability of sustained empirical scholarship on all three forces within the region; (ii) historical exposure to formal colonial rule followed by structural adjustment conditionality; and (iii) internal heterogeneity sufficient to generate counter-cases capable of qualifying the framework. Regions satisfying (ii) but not (i), including much of the Pacific and post-socialist Central Asia, were excluded on evidentiary rather than substantive grounds, a limitation returned to in the conclusion.

2. Patriarchal Norms and Gender Inequality: A Western Feminist Account

The marginalised status of women, and the factors contributing to their disadvantaged position, have long been examined by scholars, activists, and development practitioners. From the 1960s onward, Western second-wave feminists advanced the idea that "there is a generalizable, identifiable, and collectively shared experience of womanhood" accounting for gender inequality — an *all-(women)-embracing* condition of oppression shaped by the principles and mechanisms of patriarchal social systems (Benhabib and Cornell, 1987, 13).[8] While such systems may manifest differently across cultures, positionalities, and imaginaries, this perspective has portrayed *the Patriarchy* as a foundational, "near-universal fact" that *globally* constrains women's participation in the public sphere and erodes equality, sometimes leading to violence, within the household (Randall, 2017, 133; *see also* Nash, 2020, 43).

"Patriarchy" refers to the historical (re)production of a multifaceted "system of relationships, beliefs, and values" that organises the matrix of cultural, socio-economic, and political life around the elevation of men as a (perceived) *superior* group, who consistently dominates (perceived) inferior women across various domains (Nash, 2020, 43). Through the grid of the heteronormative family, this hierarchical posturing has been created and recreated via the *socialisation* of men and women respectively around the categories of *masculinity* and *femininity* (Makama, 2013; Mohanty, 2003; Waylen, 1996). Characterised by its socially constructed traits of rationality, strength, and virility, masculinity has been regarded as the best equipped to govern the *public sphere*, thus justifying men's authority in political realms and their economic *role of production*. Conversely, the category of *femininity* has been patriarchally constructed to police women according to their (perceived) compassionate and emotional "nature", thus assigning them the central *role of reproduction*. This results in women's concentration in *unpaid* labour within the household, which includes duties such as caregiving roles, taking responsibility for food, fuelwood gathering, sanitation, and water collection (Dunaway, 2001, 8; Sadasivam, 1997, 637).

Western feminist insights regarding the public/private dichotomy and the resulting gendered division of labour align with similar considerations found within analyses produced in/on developing countries (*see* Diwan and Vartanova, 2017; Gupta Lawrence and Hensly, 2023; Makama, 2013; Nartey *et al.,* 2023; van der Vleuten, 2016). This literature suggests that gender roles and patriarchal cultural practices persist unabated as regulatory systems, thus positioning these *modi operandi* as a key determinant of gender inequality. The hierarchies entrenched by patriarchal norms do not merely permit women's subordination — they actively reproduce it, embedding structural inequality across the domains of family, economy, and governance. Specifically, this system accounts for (2.1) women's lower literacy rates, (2.2) gendered

[8] The notion of patriarchy is particularly relevant for the Western feminist currents of radical and socialist feminism.

resource allocation schemes, (2.3) unequal access to health, and (2.4) reduced political representation.

2.1 Literacy and Education under Patriarchal Norms

As of 2022, global literacy rates stand at approximately 90% for men and 84% for women (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024b). However, these gender gaps are significantly more pronounced in developing countries,[9] with Sub-Saharan Africa exhibiting the lowest rates.[10] While multiple factors contribute to this disparity, limited household resources play a significant role (Blunch and Das, 2015; Colclough *et al.*, 2000, 6; Dube, 2015, 280–281). In the context of poverty, both direct costs (e.g., tuition fees, uniforms, bus fares, books) and opportunity costs (i.e., income lost in the absence of child labour) prevent school enrolment and educational attainment. However, economic constraints alone do not account for the gender gap in literacy. Instead, patriarchal norms provide a more convincing explanation, whereby educational investment is allocated based on the child's gender: sons, viewed as future breadwinners, are prioritised, while daughters are often directed toward domestic responsibilities (Dessy *et al.*, 2022, 5; Dube, 2015, 281; Jayachandran, 2015, 75–76; Makama, 2013, 115). Predominantly in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia,[11] the "low[er] values placed on girls and women" (Parsons *et al.,* 2015, 12), exacerbated by the household economic status, increases the chances of early marriages, which — between domestic duties and early pregnancies — leads women to educational exclusion (Dessy *et al*., 2022, 2; Omer *et al.*, 2021, 2). This disenfranchisement is subsequently responsible for making women less experienced and skilled, thus reducing the potential for political participation and market employability. This is reflected in low rates of female labour force participation (FLFP), which stood at around 37% in lower-middle-income countries in 2024 (ILO, 2024b) — at least in the formal sector (Ball, 2008; Dessy *et al.,* 2022; Nartey *et al.,* 2023; Parsons *et al.,* 2015; Psaki *et al*., 2021).

That patriarchal norms operate with a force partly *in*dependent of educational attainment is instantiated by the Bangladeshi case. Here, the female youth literacy rate (ages 15–24) reached 95.86% as of 2020.[12] However, this advancement has not translated into a commensurate increase in FLFP, which remains stagnant at around 37% (World Bank Open Data, 2024). In this regard, Blunch and Das (2015, 189) underline how, notwithstanding educational improvements, women are discouraged from participating in the male-dominated public realm; instead, social expectations prioritise the trait of "lojja" (shyness) as more suitable for women, aligning with traditional roles associated with marriage, reproduction, and unpaid labour in the private sphere. The case is offered not as a measure of how generally education and participation decouple, but as a clear instance of the pathway by which they can: where social expectation continues to code the public sphere as masculine, literacy gains may be *absorbed* without dislodging the norms that govern women's mobility.

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[9] As of 2022, the literacy rate of adults in the least developed countries reaches 67% (World Bank Open Data, 2023a), while in developed countries the rate reaches a minimum of 96% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024a).

[10] In this region, out of the total adult literacy rate of 68% (World Bank Open Data, 2023b), men have higher rates at 72% compared to 59% for women (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024b).

[11] For instance, as of 2020, the incidence of early marriages (<18) is the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 16 countries officially record incidences, with Niger holding the highest percentage, with a staggering 76.8% of girls married before the age of 18. Following closely is Bangladesh, reporting an incidence of 59.4 % among five other South Asian countries. Additionally, evidence of this practice extends to three Central and Latin American countries: Dominican Republic (34.6%), Brazil (23.4%), and Peru (17.3%); Egypt stands as the only representative in the MENA region with an incidence of 16.5% (Wodon *et al.*, 2020, 170).

[12] This data pertains to female youth aged 15 to 24 years old. It is impressive to note that in 1976, female literacy rates in Bangladesh were as low as 27.15% (World Bank Open Data, 2023c).

2.2 Patriarchal Economies and Unequal Resource Access

Patriarchal norms exert a profound influence on women's socio-economic status, extending beyond the unequal redistribution of educational opportunities to encompass broader gendered resource allocation schemes. These include women's disproportionate involvement in *unpaid* care work, wage disparities for equivalent or similar work to men's,[13] and barriers to leadership positions (Goetz, 2003, 35–58; Mittal, 2022, 69–70; Nartey *et al.*, 2023, 9). As effectively illustrated by Latin America, cultural expectations rooted in *machismo/marianismo* reinforce women's role as primary caregivers (Galanti, 2003; Stevens, 1973). As a result, women bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic labour, spending an average of 38 hours per week on such tasks compared to 16 hours for men (Frisancho *et al*., 2023, 2). The pattern is not confined to the region; on the most recent ILO estimates, 708 million women worldwide were outside the labour force in 2023 because of unpaid care responsibilities, against 40 million men, with care cited by 45% of women outside the labour force but by only 5% of men (ILO, 2024a). Upon entering the labour market, their "motherhood penalty" limits their participation to full-time occupation or confines them to vulnerable employment, predominantly in the care and domestic sectors (Urquidi and Chalup, 2023, 4). Additionally, gender occupational segregation directs women into lower-paying and lower-quality jobs, while male dominance in high-power and high-status positions further impedes women's labour inclusion and perpetuates socio-economic inequalities (Ferrant *et al.,* 2014, 4; Urquidi and Chalup, 2023, 3, 5). Inclusion in waged labour has nonetheless helped to erode existing patriarchal norms. For instance, the expansion of the ready-made garment (RMG) sector from the 1980s onwards has drawn *millions* of women into waged employment, generating over time measurable shifts in mobility norms, age at marriage, and greater degrees of financial autonomy (Kabeer, 2000). At the same time, this work still remains among the most precarious and physically vulnerable forms of employment within global supply chains, and its heavy feminisation is precisely what enables wages to be suppressed through mechanisms of gendered devaluation. It is also possible to observe that more disruptive and durable shifts in patriarchal relations can emerge through grassroots employment initiatives that are *not* dependent on mere incorporation into wage labour markets. This is evident in the case of India's Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), founded in 1972, which has organised informal-sector women workers through collective bargaining, credit cooperatives, and solidarity networks, demonstrably reshaping intra-household power dynamics and community labour norms in Gujarat without relying on formal employment structures or state-led programming (Rose, 1992).

When discussing gendered resource allocation, it is crucial to highlight how women's inequality is further magnified by their limited or non-existent ability to assert ownership over land and property.[14] This challenge is particularly pronounced in kinship systems like patrilocality, where the married woman typically relocates to her husband's parents' home (Dessy *et al*., 2022, 12; Jayachandran, 2015). Coupled with patrilineal norms, which dictate that only sons inherit property, this results in fewer resources being allocated to daughters, in that "after marriage a daughter's earnings will enrich another man and his family" (Dorsey, 1999, 29). The difficulty in women's ownership is exemplified by Chauhan (2014), who explores how entrenched patriarchal traditions in Pakistan perpetuate men's monopoly over the key resources of *zar*, *zan*, *zamin* (i.e., wealth, women, and land). Although Article 23 of the

[13] Research indicates that, on average, women in developing countries earn approximately 65% of male wages (Mittal, 2022, 73).

[14] The largest gender gaps in access to property are found in West and Central Africa, South Asia, MENA region, and Central Asia (Gaddis *et al.*, 2020).

1973 Constitution of Pakistan formally recognises women's property ownership rights, the pervasiveness of these cultural norms results in women controlling as little as 3% of land in urban regions and less than 1% in rural areas (Abbas *et al.,* 2022, 315).

At this point, it would be inappropriate not to acknowledge that there *has* been further, and more recent, genuine legislative progress concerning women's land rights. Ethiopia's joint land registration reforms from 2003 onwards, alongside Bolivia's 2006 agrarian reform legislation (Ley de Reconducción Comunitaria de la Reforma Agraria, No. 3545), constitute documented instances of formal legal advancement (Deininger *et al.*, 2008; República de Bolivia, 2006). One of the more recent examples is Sierra Leone's Customary Land Rights Act of 2022, which explicitly repealed discriminatory provisions embedded in the colonial-era Provinces Land Act (Cap. 122, as amended in 1972) and formally guarantees women equal rights to own and inherit land. Its companion legislation, the National Land Commission Act 2022, further mandates a minimum of 30% female representation on land-administration bodies (Government of Sierra Leone, 2022a, 2022b).

However, as these cases simultaneously demonstrate, formal legislative reform *without* sustained community-level enforcement mechanisms has repeatedly failed to translate into substantive access. The "implementation gap", that is, the distance between the formal legal level and the lived, every day, embodied conditions through which tenure is actually experienced, remains the primary obstacle in genuine reform (Dancer, 2017; Giovarelli *et al.*, 2013). In Sierra Leone, for instance, early commentary on the reforms already indicates limited local effect, owing to uneven implementation, entrenched patriarchal norms, and the particular complexities of land-sharing arrangements within polygamous households (Turay, 2025). A relatively older case, Tanzania's Village Land Act of 1999, better illustrates the longer-term dynamics of the implementation gap. Together with the Land Act of the same year, it formally granted women equal rights to acquire, hold, register, and inherit village land, while explicitly rendering void any customary rule denying women lawful access. However, implementation frequently stalled where male-dominated village land councils and clan elders retained practical authority over allocation and inheritance decisions, and where statutory equality provisions remained largely unenforced. In disputes concerning inherited land, customary patrilineal norms routinely prevailed over formal legal guarantees, while women's claims tended to succeed only when actively supported by local leaders, women's networks, or legal-aid intermediaries (Dancer, 2017). Women often remain unaware of their statutory entitlements, lack either the resources or institutional proximity necessary to navigate registration systems, and confront significant social costs when asserting claims against kin.

Looking at the past decade of NGO-sector and donor-supported initiatives, large-scale land registration programmes further corroborate both the potential and the limitations of the legal/rights-based approach. Mozambique's *Terra Segura* programme (the World Bank-financed Land Administration Project, 2018–2024), for instance, had issued land-use rights (DUAT) titles to 412,310 beneficiaries by February 2024, 42% of them women (World Bank, 2024), and the Bank's later results reporting puts the final total at more than 686,000 beneficiaries, 44% of them women (World Bank, 2026). Yet the programme's gender target counted titles registered in women's names or jointly (FNDS, n.d.), and independent research found that most titles in the communities studied were issued in the names of husbands or male relatives, with women's access mediated through marriage and in-laws; the programme also had no approach to how matrilineal land institutions should be reflected in individual titling — both of which complicate claims regarding individual tenure security (Kaarhus, 2026; Zamchiya *et al.*, 2021). Senegal's Cadastre and Land Tenure Improvement Project (PROCASEF, 2021–2026) similarly increased the share of land certificates issued to women from effectively zero to nearly 10%, with a scaled target of 30% — progress that

simultaneously underscores the extent of the original exclusion and the persistence of structural barriers (World Bank, 2025a). Pakistan's Punjab Urban Land Systems Enhancement Project (PULSE, 2022–2027) has likewise mapped and registered over 28 million parcels between 2022 and 2025, with women recorded as holders of almost 31% of them against a 32% target for 2027 (World Bank, 2025b). The distance between that figure and Senegal's 10% is itself instructive, marking the difference between titling urban property already governed by statute and certifying rural land governed by custom; neither figure should be read as a direct index of control. What such programmes establish is the institutional recognition that women's land rights require measurable administrative *visibility*. A decolonial feminist framework for land rights should therefore recognise legislative and programmatic advances as *fundamental*, while insisting that enforcement mechanisms at the individual and community level (e.g., paralegal support, community mobilisation, land-rights education, and co-titling safeguards) be integrated as a *non*-optional component of reform. The risk is that top-down programmes record nominal gains while failing to deliver the substantive, lived autonomy that secure tenure is intended to provide.

2.3 Gender, Health, and Reproductive Inequality

In healthcare, women's unequal status within the household, combined with limited resources, contributes to significant gender disparities. Traditionally, men are urged to seek medical care in formal settings, while women often resort to self-treatment due to restricted health knowledge, stemming from reduced access to education (Vlassoff, 1994). This trend is accentuated by the stigma surrounding sexually transmitted conditions like HIV/AIDS, further compounded by inadequate access to contraceptives; some 218 million women in low- and middle-income countries have an unmet need for modern contraception (Sully *et al.*, 2020). The situation is especially dire in cases of domestic violence and rape, where women hesitate to seek medical assistance fearing familial dishonour, which could result in further beatings, killings, or suicide (Fischbach and Herbert, 1997, 1173).

Although patriarchal norms emphasise women's reproductive roles, maternal mortality rates remain disproportionately high. In 2023, an estimated 260,000 maternal deaths occurred globally — a ratio of 197 per 100,000 live births, against an SDG target of 70 — with roughly 94% of them in low and lower-middle-income countries and some 70% in Sub-Saharan Africa alone (WHO *et al.*, 2025, xii–xiv). Within many households, men hold power over decision-making, leaving women with scant autonomy in family matters, including choices regarding their own childbirth. As highlighted by Omer *et al.* (2021, 5), it is often "not the decision of the pregnant woman when, why and from whom to seek healthcare" (*see also* Girum and Wasie, 2017, 5–6; Marabele *et al.*, 2020, 694). Even when women do access healthcare, they frequently encounter mistreatment within paternalistic and patriarchal health services. This mistreatment is glaringly evident in cases of obstetric violence, where medical personnel subject labouring women to physical, psychological, and sexual abuse (Alio *et al.,* 2023).

2.4 Political Visibility and Structural Exclusion

Despite recent progress, women remain significantly underrepresented in political institutions across the Global South (IPU, 2024). The structural disadvantages analysed in the preceding subsections — curtailed education, restricted economic resources, and the compounded weight of domestic responsibilities — all converge to limit women's entry into formal politics, whether in legislatures, cabinet offices, or executive roles (*see* Badru, 2005; Waylen, 1996). Even where women do possess the material and educational prerequisites for participation, they encounter a further tier of gendered obstacles (*see* Shvedova, 2005). Patriarchal norms, having "eulogized women's role in the private sphere" (Sabbagh, 2005, 55), generate active resistance to female political visibility, expressed through media ridicule (*see* Ross, 2017), party gatekeeping, and

the broader masculinist culture of political institutions (Randall, 2017, 141; Shvedova, 2005, 35–38). The cumulative, embodied weight of these barriers is captured by Sushma Swaraj, former MP and later Minister of External Affairs of India (2014–2019), as quoted in Shvedova (2005, 38):

> "It is very difficult for a woman to make up her mind to enter politics. Once she makes up her own mind, then she has to prepare her husband, and her children, and her family. Once she has overcome all these obstacles and applies for the ticket, then the male aspirants against whom she is applying makeup all sorts of stories about her. And after all this, when her name goes to the party bosses, they do not select her name because they fear losing that seat."

Within this context, it is also possible to note, for instance, how Rwanda has achieved the world's highest proportion of female parliamentary representation (currently over 60%) despite operating under heavily aid-conditioned fiscal constraints (IPU, 2024). However, as feminist political economists have noted, Rwanda's case *also* demonstrates that formal political representation achieved through constitutional quotas and post-conflict state reconstruction has not automatically translated into structural transformation of the care economy or reversal of the labour burdens analysed above (Burnet, 2008).

3. Beyond the Patriarchy: The Colonial (Re)Production of Gender

Western feminist scholarship has made significant contributions to identifying the patriarchal structures that subordinate women, as the preceding analysis demonstrates. Yet, postcolonial feminist scholars have identified a key limitation in this framework: the assumption of a universal patriarchy as the *primary* explanation for women's oppression worldwide (Herr, 2014, 4). By overlooking the specificity of colonised women's experiences, this framework produces an abstract and homogenised subject, i.e., the male-dominated (White) Woman, that obscures the "multiple and complex oppressions" of women living in developing nation-states (Herr, 2014, 2; *see also* Mohanty, 2003, 19; Waylen, 1996, 8). Here, unequal gender dynamics are deeply enmeshed with histories of race and class/caste that "cannot be separated from the colonial experience" (Acosta-Belén and Bose, 1990, 299; *see* Mohanty *et al.*, 1991). Colonial rule subjected women to what has been described as "double colonisation" (Oyěwùmí, 1997, 22). The first dimension of this subjugation operated through race, where the construed trait of "bestiality" (i.e. nonwhiteness) was introduced to legitimise the domination of *all* colonised peoples. Superimposed on racial discrimination was the *Western* patriarchal notion of women's inferiority, which was exported to the colonies to tame their exotic "uncivilised" nature (Icaza and Vásquez, 2016, 67; Lugones, 2008, 3). The analytical vocabulary for this compounding is Crenshaw's (1989, 1991), i.e., oppressions treated as discrete axes within single-issue frameworks are lived, and adjudicated, at their intersection, so that women positioned at more than one fall through the very categories designed to protect them; this is what Collins (2000) theorises as a matrix of domination, in which race, gender, class, and empire interlock rather than accumulate. As a result, this intersectional axis of race and gender within the colonial power matrix has left behind a persisting four-element hierarchy: "men (European), women (European), native ([nonwhite] men), and Other ([nonwhite] women)" (Oyěwùmí, 1997, 122). Given this compounded domination, the Western feminist interpretation that views Patriarchy as the *primordial* root of gender inequality for *all* women across the globe is not simply an "ahistorical framework of analysis" but is significantly unjust to colonised, racialised women (Lugones, 2008, 7).

That colonialism has played a central role in shaping gender inequality in developing contexts is unequivocal, particularly when considering the relative gender equality observed in some pre-colonial societies (Lugones, 2007, 187). In this regard, Reid (1988, 629) notes that, in 16th and 17th pre-colonial Southeast Asia, the reproductive role ascribed to women — instead of

marginalising them into the household — "gave them magical and ritual powers which it was difficult for a man to match". Compared to the chastity demanded by 16th- and 17th-century European patriarchal societies, Southeast Asian women experienced significantly greater freedoms: they could divorce, engage in pre-marital sex, and actively participate in trade and marketing. Colonialism's gendered impact was even more devastating in communities in which the Western conceptions of the gender binary and resulting unequal power relationships were brought in *for the first time* (Lugones 2008). Pre-colonial indigenous populations in the Americas, for instance, were often gynocentric, recognised more than the two "traditional" genders, and accepted homosexuality positively (Gunn Allen, 1992, 37). Similarly, Oyěwùmí (1997, 122) emphasises that pre-colonial Yorùbá communities in West Africa did not conform to the gender "bio-logic" of Western societies: gender inequality was absent because the categories of masculinity and femininity were non-existent in the traditional Western sense; individuals possessed multiple identities, there was no gendered private/public division of labour, and both men and women contributed *equally* to the development of families (the personal) and communities (the political) (Muraina and Ajímátanraẹjẹ, 2023, 2034–2036). In this context, the unequal (re)construction of the category of "women" as opposed to men is recognised as "one of the very first accomplishments of the colonial state" (Oyěwùmí, 1997, 124). Paradoxically, the less rigid binary schemes of gendered regulation and labour division found in several pre-colonial societies were viewed as indicative of a "primitive," "backward" race, as commonly portrayed by 19th-century European ethnologists (McClintock, 1995, 22; Mies, 1986, 92–93). This portrayal of women's freer condition as 'backward' further legitimised the colonial project of "civilisation," serving to "emasculat[e] men by asserting that they were not capable of taking care of their women" (Chitnis and Wright, 2007, 1318; *see also* Liddle and Joshi, 1985; Muraina and Ajímátanraẹjẹ, 2023; Randall, 2017, 135).

This colonial rhetoric was often solidified by Western feminist discourse, which depicted women as docile and oppressed beings in need of the white imperial saviour's hand. Such a narrative gained further traction when justifying the colonisation of 'classic patriarchies' like India, which already exhibited gendered unequal power relationships. Despite the undeniable pre-colonial reality, British rule effectively exacerbated gender inequality. Prior to colonial intervention, India's legal framework was characterised by a pluralistic and fragmented nature, based on unsystematic customary principles usually safeguarded in the *Smrtis* (the legal commentaries). These commentaries presented a remarkable heterogeneity, indicating that gendered laws governing inheritance, marriage, and family relationships varied across regions and castes: While some women could inherit and decide whom to marry, others were denied such rights (Chitnis and Wright, 2007). However, following India's *direct* subjugation to the English Monarchy in 1858, this customary legal praxis underwent codification, formally *institutionalising* "protectionist and patriarchal" legal principles that overpowered *all* women. Traversing the post-colonial, Indian laws concerning women's rights continue to bear the Victorian imprint of "chastity, innocence, self-effacement, and passiveness" (Chitnis and Wright, 2007, 1319; *see also* Liddle and Joshi, 1985).

As evidenced by the Victorian remnants within the Indian legal system, developing countries are still affected by what Latin American feminist María Lugones (2007, 2008) terms the "coloniality of gender." This concept refers to the enduring legacy of colonial sexual regulation, whose patriarchal traits have permeated the post-colonial and continue to account for unequal gender relations to this day. Lugones highlights how the unequal matrix of gender dynamics is perpetuated and leveraged by another entrenched colonial legacy — the asymmetric system of capital accumulation. Indeed, the maximisation of resources, wealth, and labour prompted by this system fundamentally hinges on the gendered subdivision between economies of production (allotted to men) and economies of reproduction (allotted to women).

In this regard, Boserup (1970, 53–57) and, after her, Waylen (1996, 56) stress how the introduction of cash crops for export during the colonial era depressed the status of women: within the newly-introduced economic system, access to agriculture, technical expertise, and credit were granted to men. Women, as in section (2), were pushed through "housewifisation" — excluded from waged production, confined to unpaid domestic reproduction, and thereby rendered economically invisible and structurally exploitable — retiring from the public sphere to take care of subsistence and reproduction of future capitalist workers *gratis*, thus losing *their* capital (Mies, 1986). As exemplified by Guyo (2017, 8) in the case of pastoral Borana women of Northern Kenya, the capitalist tenet of commercialisation led to the redistribution of over 99% of ranches to men, replacing collective ownership with individual property rights. To this day, this shift accounts for minimal access to land and dramatically fewer economic resources for women.

While direct colonial rule has ended, the lucrative alliance between capitalism and gendered division of labour persists, now exploited by neocolonial capitalist powers to maximise resource extraction. As remarked by Mohanty (2003, 246), the proliferation of neoliberal structural adjustment policies has *reprivatised* women's labour by shifting the responsibility for social welfare from the state to the household. Against this preliminary backdrop, the following section will more adequately scrutinise how these development policies account for the perpetuation of gender inequality.

4. Neoliberal Development and the Recolonisation of Women's Labour

Following the oil price shocks of the 1970s and the global recession of the 1980s, many developing countries experienced significant economic instability, characterised by inflation, declining export earnings, and reduced national income (Ali and Mujahid-Mukhtar, 2003, 670). This created conditions for intervention by Bretton Woods institutions, which sought to stabilise these economies through the introduction of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) (El Morally, 2020, 7). SAPs are macroeconomic policies designed to promote economic stabilisation by offering a "Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility Loan," aimed at assisting debt-ridden countries in mitigating foreign debt deficit (Campbell, 2010, 2). These loans, implemented by the World Bank and the IMF, are conditional and tailored to recipient countries (IMF, 2001; Sadasivam, 1997, 630, 632). However, consistent with neoliberal orthodoxy, they uniformly pursue price stability, market deregulation, foreign investment, and trade liberalisation (IMF, 2001). Essentially, these policies permit Western economic powers to formally and legally influence the economy of signatory states.

The IMF has claimed that these programs aim to *equally* improve the economic conditions of *all* countries, *all* populations, and *all* genders (IMF, 2001).[15] However, despite this ostensibly gender-neutral intent, the reality often diverges significantly. Orthodox SAPs have *typically* prioritised profit maximisation and the minimisation of governmental intervention through the privatisation of parastatal organisations and fiscal austerity strategies. The latter resulted in reducing — if not eliminating — government expenditures on food, health, and education (Campbell, 2010, 2; El Morally, 2020, 7; Sadasivam, 1997, 635). Although the effects of SAPs vary across contexts, a common outcome is evident: it is generally "women who, as workers, producers, consumers, wives, and mothers, are the shock absorbers at the immense cost of their well-being" (Sadasivam, 1997, 633).[16] First, SAPs have exacerbated poverty by disrupting the balance between income and prices; given the entrenched (patriarchal) gender norms and roles

[15] Crewe and Harrison (1998, 30–42) rightly argue that the foundation of neoclassical economics — on which neoliberal policies are based — is the Rational, Utility Maximising, Profit-Driven, Economic Man, which renders the whole capitalist system inherently gendered by default.

[16] Emphasis added.

extensively analysed in Section (2), women are often the first to be disadvantaged by gendered resource allocation schemes, which exclude them from education, healthcare, property, and housing (Ali and Mujahid-Mukhtar, 2003, 677; Rai, 2005, 242). Second, reductions in public spending have undermined social safety nets on which women disproportionately depend. The design of orthodox SAPs has not traditionally accounted for the fact that women have less access to productive resources such as land and credit, making subsidies *fundamental* for them. Specifically, the cutbacks fail to consider how those safety nets are primarily reinvested in the *unpaid* economies of reproduction and sustenance (El Morally, 2020, 8); therefore, the overfocus on "the magic of the market" (Shah *et al.,* 1994, WS39) and the public realm of production does not adequately address the fact that the condition of possibility of market freedom itself is "*sustained* by *unpaid* nonmarket work mostly undertaken by women" (Sadasivam, 1997, 636). As a result, women often compensate for resource shortages through increased labour "to generate family survival requirements" (Dunaway, 2001, 14). Given the exclusion of "the personal" from the purview of SAPs, women bear a disproportionate share of adjustment costs, as there exists minimal (patriarchal) expectation for men to contribute to domestic responsibilities. As aptly put by Rai (2005, 241–242), "the paradox of the privileging of women as producers as well as reproducers" means that their "lives are being further stretched to cover the expanded time/space", indicating that "women's labour is being considered infinitely elastic". In this regard, SAPs encourage women's participation in paid labour markets to increase the earnings needed to supplement lost household income (Lindio-McGovern, 2007, 286; Sadasivam, 1997, 638). In particular, women are concentrated in export-processing zones (EPZs) that cater to the needs of transnational corporations (TNCs) for cheap labour, primarily in garment, textile, and electronic industries (Sadasivam, 1997, 642). Such zones have since proliferated. UNCTAD counts some 5,400 special economic zones across 147 economies, up from roughly 4,000 five years earlier, with more than 500 further zones in the pipeline (UNCTAD, 2019, 137). Comparable gender-disaggregated employment data at zone level, however, remain scarce, and the widely repeated estimate that women make up 60–70% of the zone workforce rests on an ageing and uneven evidentiary base — a gap that UNCTAD's first dedicated set of gender-equality-in-trade indicators, released in 2024, has only begun to close (UNCTAD, 2025). Although EPZs are intended to increase foreign exchange earnings, they often generate precarious working conditions. In a pro-profit neoliberal scheme funding TNCs, bank officials and consultants not only redraft the fiscal policies of (developing) countries, but also, in a (neo)colonial manner, directly influence "labour laws (…), energy and environmental regulations, and civil service rules" (Sadasivam, 1997, 649). This collusion between state and commercial interests leads to worker exploitation, with labour rights and regulations being circumvented, resulting in wages far below those paid for comparable work in "developed" countries. While these capitalist-led exploitative practices affect all workers in EPZs, women labourers face greater inequality. First, women generally constitute the *majority* of employees in EPZs,[17] as they are deemed "docile" and *less* likely to challenge labour conditions (Payer, 1982, 156; Rai, 2005, 243) and *more* likely to perform repetitive tasks with no opportunity for skill transfer (Payer, 1982, 156; Rai, 2005, 243; Sadasivam, 1997, 643; Shah *et al.*, 1994, WS40). Second, women are more profitable to TNCs: pre-existing gender norms account for the "cultural devaluation of the[ir] work", resulting in lower wages than men. This devaluation is not incidental but functional; as Kabeer (2016, 312) argues, it is precisely the lower cost of women's labour relative to men's that has driven the profitability of labour-intensive export sectors and explained employers' marked preference for it. Lower wages and longer hours mean exploitation for women, but a greater quantity of

[17] This phenomenon is often referred to as "feminization of labour" (e.g., Dunaway, 2001, 4; Rai, 2005, 243; Shah *et al.,* 1994).

profitable goods for the (capitalist) market (Dunaway, 2001, 20). The feminisation of export employment thus expanded the quantity of women's paid work while entrenching its poor quality (Kabeer, 2016, 311).

This last observation, however, must be handled with care, for it is easy to slide from it into a common pitfall in analyses of labour feminisation: treating the feminisation of export production as universal, stable, and expressive of some fixed structural position of "Woman." The image of EPZ labour as uniformly docile, feminised, and wage-suppressed has a distinguished feminist genealogy. It was Elson and Pearson's (1981) influential account — summed up in its title, "Nimble Fingers Make Cheap Workers" — that first exposed how supposedly natural feminine qualities were mobilised to justify women's concentration in low-paid, subordinated assembly work. Yet, subsequent scholarship has shown that neither femininity nor feminisation should be understood in such uniform terms. As Salzinger's (2003) ethnography of four Ciudad Juárez maquiladoras demonstrates, the productive femininity invoked by managers is not a pre-existing characteristic of women workers but something actively produced within particular labour regimes; only one of her four factories conformed to the stereotype of the docile feminine worker, while the others generated markedly different forms of gendered labour subjectivity. Nor is it only the meaning of feminised labour that varies, but its very *extent*. Caraway (2007) shows that women's employment shares track the labour-intensity of particular industries more closely than EPZ status as such, while Kucera and Tejani (2014) document a process of manufacturing "defeminisation" as sectors upgrade technologically and move beyond labour-intensive production. Women are frequently drawn into industries while work is casualised, labour-intensive, and poorly remunerated, only to be displaced by men as production becomes capital-intensive and wages rise — a dynamic borne out by Kabeer's (2016, 308) own comparative cases, in which formal employment de-feminised in Egypt even as it expanded in Morocco.

Adjustment programmes themselves differed in content, sequencing, and severity, and states with stronger labour protections, denser public health infrastructure, or greater fiscal room absorbed them differently. The trajectories of Bangladesh's ready-made garment sector, the Mexican maquila corridor, and East and Southeast Asian electronics assembly are therefore not interchangeable; they depend on the strength of labour organisation, the robustness of labour protections, the degree of state intervention, and the extent to which initial feminisation has been sustained, eroded, or reversed over time. None of this, however, licenses the opposite error of dissolving the analysis into pure contextual particularity. The claim advanced here is *not* that every adjustment programme (and EPZ) produced identical gendered outcomes, which would be false; but that a consistent mechanism operated across programmes of widely varying design. The variation concerns the form and durability of feminisation, not the logic that drives it. Women are incorporated into export production precisely where labour is cheapest, least protected, and most easily disposed of, and they are displaced as those conditions improve. What travels is therefore not a fixed "feminised EPZ" but the systematic availability of women's labour as the cheaper input, secured by a cultural devaluation that precedes the factory and outlives any particular industry. This is the sense in which patriarchal constraint exhibits what Kabeer (2016, 315), following Rubin (1975), calls both "endless variety" and "monotonous similarity". The mechanism is generalisable even where its outcomes are not, and it is at the level of the mechanism — rather than of any particular EPZ or programme — that the neocolonial organisation of women's labour must be theorised.

The same gendered division of labour accounts for *further* inequality in the agricultural sector, where SAPs have advocated for a transition from import substitution to the cultivation of export-oriented cash crops. In this context, mirroring colonial times, men often control cash crop production, while women are confined to subsistence agriculture in marginal and less

fertile lands (Ali and Mujahid-Mukhtar, 2003, 673; Due and Gladwin, 1991; Sadasivam, 1997, 640). Within this context, rural women bear disproportionately higher costs than their urban counterparts. Their dependence on subsistence agriculture and community-managed resources means that privatisation of land and elimination of food subsidies strike with greater immediacy, while their distance from urban social infrastructure reduces access to whatever compensatory programmes exist (Kabeer, 2005; Seguino, 2010). Ethnicity and caste further stratify these outcomes. In South Asia, Dalit and Adivasi women are systematically excluded from credit schemes and government land redistribution programmes by caste-based gatekeeping, while in Sub-Saharan Africa, ethnic minority women face compounded barriers in accessing extension services and formal land titles (Rai, 2005, 236–238). Sexuality stratifies these outcomes in an equally structural fashion. As Lugones (2007) insists, the colonial/modern gender system was heterosexualist at its foundation, and among its afterlives are the criminal codes through which colonial administrations penalised same-sex intimacy and gender variance — provisions that survive in many post-colonial statute books and that continue to exclude lesbian, bisexual, and gender-nonconforming women from household-based entitlements, from land claims routed through marriage, and from the care-conditioned transfers discussed below (Rao, 2020). Religious status operates in a comparable register, functioning less as a cultural attribute than as a mechanism of legal and economic allocation: personal-status regimes governing marriage, inheritance, and custody distribute property along confessional lines, while the figure of the pious or veiled woman has been mobilised both to legitimise colonial and developmental intervention and to discipline women's claims from within (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Mahmood, 2005). Neither axis is reducible to the patriarchal, colonial, or neoliberal force taken singly; each is produced at their intersection, and each determines which women a given intervention is able to reach. Disability represents perhaps the most acute invisibility in both SAP design and social protection responses. Mitra *et al.* (2013) document that women with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries face higher rates of multidimensional poverty, compounded by care deficits that SAP-era austerity intensifies. Still, disability is *absent* from virtually all gender-and-development frameworks examined in this paper. The absence is all the more striking because the neocolonial economy analysed here itself produces impairment: through occupational injury in unregulated EPZs and extractive industries, toxic exposure at extraction sites, malnutrition and withdrawn maternal healthcare under austerity, and conflict in regions shaped by colonial partition. As Meekosha (2011) argues, disability in the Global South cannot be theorised apart from colonialism and its continuing economic forms, since impairment is disproportionately concentrated precisely where colonial and neocolonial extraction has been most intense. The coloniality of gender is in this sense inseparable from what might be called a "coloniality of disability." The same accumulation regime that devalues women's labour also produces the disabled bodies it subsequently abandons to unsupported household care — care performed, overwhelmingly, by women.

Before finishing, it is also important to acknowledge that the orthodoxy of SAPs has not gone unrevised. The post-Washington Consensus era has produced partial revisions to the programmes described above. Rodrik (2006) argued that the uniform application of liberalisation prescriptions had delivered disappointing growth, and international financial institutions subsequently folded social protection floors into later programme designs (ILO, 2012). Much of the contemporary social protection agenda, indeed, emerged precisely as a response to the damaging social consequences of adjustment and austerity (Antonopoulos, 2013, 2). The most substantive response has been the expansion of conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes across Latin America and South Asia: Brazil's Bolsa Família, Mexico's PROGRESA/Oportunidades, and Pakistan's Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) have extended cash benefits to millions of women and reduced certain poverty indicators.

It is also true, however, that structural ambivalence can be identified in CCT design. By directing transfers through women while conditioning them on compliance with gendered care responsibilities (i.e., children's school attendance, health check-ups, nutrition), these programmes simultaneously recognise and *reinforce* women as the primary managers of household *re*production (Molyneux, 2006). The care burden is monetised but *not* redistributed. Antonopoulos (2013, 19–20) makes the same point from within the social protection literature, observing that because eligibility is organised around a caregiver identity, CCTs risk entrenching the very ideal of the dutiful mother that they reward, treating women through their reproductive function rather than as economic agents in their own right. Kabeer (2005) likewise cautions that gains in women's access to income need not transform the gendered architecture of labour; women may gain income while retaining full unpaid workloads, a pattern consistent with Seguino's (2010) argument that export-oriented growth has coexisted with, and at times relied on, gender wage inequality. These developments demonstrate that reforms undertaken within the neoliberal framework address symptoms while leaving the structural conditions of women's exploitation intact.

To summarise, it is clear that SAPs have contributed to gender inequality in five key ways: (1) the overfocus on the public sphere of production invisibilises women's *unpaid* household work, consequently overburdening them with increased workloads due to the interplay of inflation, low income, and patriarchal norms; (2) SAPs perpetuate patriarchal gendered divisions of labour, leaving women with minimal or no access to land, credit, or income, thus reinforcing conditions of poverty and economic dependence;[18] (3) reductions in food and health subsidies detrimentally impact women's health, as gendered nutritional redistribution schemes prioritise the food security of breadwinners; (4) the lack of transferable skills within TNCs reduces women's placement in the formal sector, perpetuating lower socio-economic standing and vulnerable employability; (5) the overallocation of labour on women makes it impossible to focus on higher education (limiting access to better jobs) and political participation.

5. Conclusion: Decolonising Gender Equality in Development

This analysis demonstrates that women in developing countries experience multi-layered forms of oppression shaped by intersecting structural forces that bear differently on differently situated women. The paper began by examining patriarchy as a central framework in Western feminist scholarship. This framework helped observe how the patriarchal public/private divide and the resulting gendered division of labour effectively account for gender inequality across Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. However, this analysis remains incomplete without recognising the role of colonialism in reshaping and intensifying these inequalities. Infiltrating the post-colonial, the coloniality of gender does not simply account for women's disadvantages in education, material resources, health, and political participation; more alarmingly, it ties these inequalities to the (neo)colonial system of capitalist accumulation. As demonstrated by the investigation of SAPs, neoliberal regimes continue to exploit the patriarchal and neocolonial "ideology of the male breadwinner", thus profiting from undervalued (i.e., cheaper) female work and perpetuating women's unequal standing in society (Cho, 2004, 30).

[18] It is possible to observe a gender poverty gap as well: in 2025, 9.2% of women and girls (376 million) lived in extreme poverty, on less than $2.15 per day, against 8.6% of men and boys (355 million), and on current trends 351 million women and girls will still do so in 2030 (UN Women and UN DESA, 2025). Given this disparity, scholars often refer to this phenomenon in terms of "feminization of poverty" (e.g., Sadasivam, 1997).

Against this background, this study has proposed a *decolonial feminist framework* for development, one that centres social reproduction, values unpaid and care work as economic labour, and recognises the colonial origins of gendered global economic hierarchies.

Conceptually, this paper's decolonial feminist framework insists that gender inequality in the Global South cannot be adequately theorised without centring the neocolonial reproduction of gender hierarchies, and it critiques rather than works within the neoliberal development architecture that previous gender equality frameworks largely accepted as their institutional context. The contribution therefore repositions women *not* as beneficiaries of modernisation but as active producers of political and economic life whose labour and knowledge have been *systematically* invisibilised by the very frameworks designed to assist them.

Practically, this reframing implies that meaningful gender-responsive policy requires structural change across three interconnected domains. Crucially, none of these reforms can be delivered through top-down legislative, fiscal, or technocratic design *alone*; each depends for its substantive realisation on the same organised, bottom-up community agency that this paper has identified as the decisive variable in translating formal entitlement into lived and concrete access.

First, redistributive welfare systems must be designed to recognise and compensate unpaid care and reproductive labour as *public* economic contributions, *not* private obligations. As Section 2 demonstrated, the patriarchal assignment of reproductive work to women underpins their exclusion from education, employment, and political participation; as Section 4 showed, neoliberal austerity further intensifies this burden by transferring state responsibilities onto the household. Welfare provision that explicitly values care labour — e.g., through social transfers, public childcare infrastructure, time policies, and pension credits for unpaid work — would *begin* to address the structural invisibility of women's economic contribution. Here, it is fundamental to follow Elson's (2017) three-R framework: Recognise, Reduce, and Redistribute unpaid care work. Redistribution, however, runs not only between women and men but among women themselves, since care obligations are routinely displaced onto poorer, racialised, and migrant women; recognition that overlooks this risks easing one hierarchy while consolidating another. Also, recognition at the level of national accounting is necessary but not sufficient, as redistribution has historically depended on community-rooted institutions rather than state provision alone.[19] Concrete measurement tools already exist for this purpose: Time Use Surveys, now implemented by national statistics offices in Mexico, South Africa, and India, provide a methodology for quantifying unpaid care work within national accounting systems, and the ILO's Social Protection Floor framework offers an existing institutional vehicle for translating such measurements into enforceable entitlements (ILO, 2012; ILO, 2018). Financing these provisions, however, entails genuine trade-offs that gender-responsive frameworks have tended to understate. Consumption taxes such as VAT, favoured under structural adjustment for their administrative simplicity, are regressive and fall disproportionately on poor women (Grown and Valodia, 2010); financing care infrastructure equitably therefore requires a shift toward progressive direct taxation, the closure of corporate tax loopholes, and the curtailment of illicit financial flows, which drain the Global South of sums substantially exceeding inbound development assistance (UNECA, 2015). Gender-responsive budgeting offers an institutional method for embedding these priorities (Elson, 2006; Stotsky, 2016), but its record shows that it succeeds only where civil-society and grassroots women's organisations are positioned to monitor and contest allocations.

[19] Razavi's (2007) care diamond, which distributes care across state, market, family, and community, is instructive precisely because it refuses to locate the solution solely in the state

Second, land and inheritance reform must dismantle the patrilineal and patrilocal norms that concentrate property and material resources in male hands. The cases of Pakistan and the Borana pastoralists of Kenya (Sections 2 and 3) illustrated how colonial codification formalised customary male ownership into legal entitlement, a pattern that post-colonial states have largely preserved. Because the women in these cases are situated as much by indigeneity, ethnicity, religious status, and sexuality as by gender, reform must be capable of reaching the women least equipped to claim formal rights, and not only those already best placed to benefit from them. Reform requires not only legislative change but also the community-level enforcement mechanisms necessary to ensure that formal rights translate into substantive access. Ethiopia's post-2003 land registration programme illustrates this precisely: joint titling without accompanying local awareness campaigns consistently failed to shift actual ownership patterns, while communities where women's rights were actively communicated showed measurable improvements in land security (Deininger *et al.*, 2008).

Third, a shift from growth-oriented to *care-oriented* development metrics — moving beyond GDP per capita toward indicators that capture time poverty, unpaid work burdens, and reproductive wellbeing — is *necessary* to make women's labour visible to policymakers. As the analysis of SAPs in Section 4 demonstrated, macroeconomic frameworks that measure only market production systematically exclude the reproductive economy on which market activity depends, thereby perpetuating the very inequalities they claim to address. Several existing frameworks point in this direction: the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index, the Social Progress Index's reproductive-wellbeing indicators, and Elson and Çağatay's (2000) work on the social content of macroeconomic policy provide partial models for reorienting national and international accounting towards reproductive labour. This paper argues for their wider adoption and deeper integration into development-conditionality frameworks, rather than their current status as supplementary indices peripheral to the GDP measure that continues to drive structural-adjustment design. Making women's labour visible is not only a technical exercise in indicator selection; it is also a question of *who* collects and controls data. Participatory and community-based data practices that engage women as producers and not merely as subjects of measurement are better placed to capture the textures of time poverty and reproductive burden that aggregate indices flatten (D'Ignazio and Klein, 2020).

Taken together, these three domains share a common vulnerability, i.e., each can be implemented in a manner that serves the most advantaged women within a given context while leaving the position of the least advantaged substantially unchanged. Recognition of care labour can be captured by those already able to document it; land titling can consolidate the claims of women whose caste or ethnicity already grants them standing before customary authorities; disaggregated metrics can proliferate without ever reaching the populations that aggregate figures conceal. This is not an argument against these reforms but a specification of the condition under which they become transformative. A decolonial feminist framework must therefore ask which women any given intervention is structurally positioned to reach, and which forms of subordination remain invisible to it even when it succeeds on its own terms.

Several limitations follow from this design and should be stated plainly. (i) The regional balance is uneven. The three case sites were chosen for documentary density, which means the framework is best evidenced where the literature is thickest — Anglophone scholarship on Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia — and least tested where it is thinnest. MENA, Southeast Asia, the Pacific, and post-socialist Central Asia appear here only in passing, and their absence constrains the argument rather than reflecting on their relevance; the same holds for the language restriction, which under-represents Lusophone, Francophone, and non-European-language scholarship. (ii) The regions are themselves internally plural to a degree that any framework of this kind flattens: the conditions of a Dhaka garment worker, a Borana

pastoralist, and a Bolivian campesina are not interchangeable, and the recurrence of a mechanism across them should not be read as equivalence of experience. (iii) The study rests on secondary and empirically grounded studies rather than primary fieldwork, and on aggregate indices whose developed/developing taxonomy is itself among the objects of its critique; where such indices are used, they contextualise rather than demonstrate. (iv) The evidence base is not evenly distributed across the three forces: the neoliberal argument rests largely on scholarship generated during and shortly after the structural adjustment era, and the extent to which its mechanisms operate identically under the post-Washington-Consensus policy architecture described in section (4) is asserted here rather than demonstrated. (v) Consequently, generalisability is claimed at the level of mechanism rather than of outcome, as argued in section (4). The same qualification governs the recommendations that follow: care infrastructure designed around the conjugal household will not reach women whose households are not legible to it, and land titling routed through marriage will not reach women whose unions are unrecognised in law — which is to say that the axes of sexuality and religious status introduced in section (4) are not an addendum to the policy argument but a condition of its reach. Testing that claim against cases selected for variation rather than for density would be the natural next step, and would properly extend the intersecting axes of disability, sexuality, and religious status that this paper has been able to treat only in outline.

Finally, these proposals inhabit a tension the paper cannot resolve, i.e., each can be pursued as an incremental reform within existing development frameworks, yet the paper's own analysis suggests that incremental reform is structurally insufficient. The colonial and neoliberal architecture that reproduces gender inequality is not incidental to development as currently practised; it is constitutive of it. What the foregoing makes clear is that where transformation has occurred, its motor has consistently been organised collective agency from below rather than benevolent reform from above. That agency, however, is itself internally differentiated and vulnerable to capture; movements can reproduce the caste, colonial, and ableist hierarchies they oppose whenever relatively privileged women speak *on behalf of*, rather than *alongside*, those situated at the sharpest intersections of these structures. Naming this tension is therefore not a concession to pessimism but a clarification of the scale, and the source, of the (bottom-up) transformation that a genuinely decolonial feminist politics would require.

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