
What Accounts for Gender Inequalities in “Developing” Countries? **Patriarchal Norms, ‘Development’ Policies, and, maybe, (Neo)Colonialism**

Setting the Stage: Framing the Issue and Presenting Data

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) unequivocally proclaims that “*all* human beings are born free and equal”¹ and explicitly condemns *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 realm 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 Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW)³ in 1979 and the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* in 1995⁴. These agreements have not only reiterated the formal principles of equality enshrined in the UDHR, but have also articulated a comprehensive agenda aimed at ensuring equal access for *all* women across public life, health, education, and employment. International organizations such as UN Women and global aid programs, including primarily the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have — at least apparently⁵ — made concerted efforts to reduce the access gap to women's equal opportunities. These measures, combined with the gradual integration of *formal* gender equality principles into domestic legal systems, have undoubtedly had an impact. However, the *substantive* reality of gender inequality remains unacceptable (almost) worldwide: at the existing rate of progress, current projections suggest that achieving full parity will require 131 years (World Economic Forum 2023, 5). Notably, the data underscores that gender divides are particularly pronounced in ‘developing’ nation-states. While “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 are assessed in terms of overall low welfare indicators, i.e., low GDP per capita, poverty,

¹ UN General Assembly 1948, Art.1; emphasis added.

² UN General Assembly 1948, Art. 2; emphasis added.

³ UN General Assembly 1979.

⁴ UN Specialised Conferences 1995.

⁵ With a focus on neoliberal policies, the controversial effects of development interventions will be furthered and more adequately scrutinised in Section (3).

⁶ Emphasis added.

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 (2023, 5, 12) neatly reinforces this ‘developed’/‘developing’ dichotomy: the Nordic European territories of Iceland, Norway, and Finland claim the podium, having respectively reached 91.2%, 87.9%, and 86.3% of gender parity. Conversely, Algeria, Chad (57.0%), and Afghanistan (40.5%) languish at the bottom ranks.

What accounts for this gender differential within ‘developing’ states?

In striving to address this question, this piece endeavours to probe the roots of gender inequality by progressively drawing upon theoretical feminist motifs and applying them to the broader literature on gender disparity within ‘developing’ countries. The significance of engaging with 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). In an attempt to rectify this unwarranted marginalisation, I aim to elucidate how “the personal is political” in three parts (Hanisch 1970). In section (1), I will explore Western feminist discourse on entrenched patriarchal norms and examine how these values account for gender gaps in literacy rates, socio-economic status, health equality, and political participation within ‘developing’ countries. Building on this, in section (2), I will problematise Western feminism’s assumptions of a universal sisterhood by introducing insights from postcolonial feminism; these will illuminate how the experience of colonialism in ‘developing’ nations has (en)gendered or exacerbated pre-existing gender asymmetries that keep exploiting women to sustain the global system of capital accumulation. Finally, in the third section (3), I will expand on (2) by showcasing how neoliberal structural adjustment policies (partly) account for gender inequality in ‘developing’ countries.

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).

1) The Patriarchy as a Universal Fact

The marginalised status of women and the factors contributing to their disadvantaged standing within society have been subjects of interest for scholars, activists, and development workers for decades. Starting in the 1960s, Western second-wave feminists began advocating 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). *What exactly does patriarchy entail, then?*

“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 (re)created via the *socialisation* of men and women respectively around the category 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 (re)constructed to police women according to their (perceived) compassionate and emotional “nature”, thus assigning them the central *role of reproduction*. This is characterised by *unpaid* labour within the *private sphere* of 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).

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

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 within ‘developing’ societies, thus positioning these *modi operandi* as a key determinant of gender inequality. Indeed, the hierarchisation endorsed by patriarchal norms seemingly condones women’s structurally unequal position in families, which — from the personal — reverberates within society and permeates daily cultural, economic, and political patterns of inequality. Specifically, this system of domination accounts for (a) women’s lower literacy rates, (b) gendered resource allocation schemes, (c) unequal access to health, and (d) reduced political representation.

(1a) Women’s Lower Literacy Rates (and Patriarchal Norms)

As of 2022, 90% of men and 84% of women are literate worldwide (Dyvik 2024). However, significant gender gaps are particularly pronounced within ‘developing’ countries,⁹ with Sub-Saharan Africa exhibiting the lowest rates.¹⁰ Several factors account for this gender disparity, with restricted financial resources at the household level playing a prominent role (Colclough *et al.* 2000, 6; Blunch and Dus 2014; 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, while economic challenges may explain lower literacy rates *overall*, they do not effectively account for the gender gap. Instead, this is aptly elucidated by persisting patriarchal paradigms, wherein the criterion for allocating educational opportunities is the *gender of the offspring*: the sons, viewed as the future breadwinners, are prioritised, while daughters are often consigned to illiteracy and household chores (Dessy, *et al.* 2022, 5; Dube 2015, 281; Jayachandran 2015, 75-76; Malama 2013, 115). Predominantly in Sub-Saharan

⁹ As of 2022, the literacy rate of adults in the ‘least developed’ countries reaches 67% (World Bank Data 2023a), while in ‘developed’ countries the rate reaches a minimum of 96% (World Population Review 2024).

¹⁰ In this region, out of the total adult literacy rate of 68% (World Bank Data 2023b), men have higher rates at 72% compared to 59% for women (Bucholz 2022).

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.*, 2022, 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 lower percentages of female labour force participation (FLFP), which stands at 31% within ‘developing’ countries (Mittal 2022, 73) — at least in the formal sector (Ball 2008; Dessy *et al.* 2022; Nartey *et al.* 2023; Parsons *et al.* 2015; Psakhi *et al.* 2021).

The priority allotted to patriarchal norms is further corroborated when understanding how such attitudes persevere in marginalising women, *despite significant advancements in closing the educational gender gap*. A notable example is Bangladesh, where the female literacy rate amounts to 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 Dus (2015, 189) underline how, notwithstanding the 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.

(1b) Gendered Resource Allocation Schemes (and Patriarchal Norms)

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 primarily include women’s disproportionate involvement in *unpaid* household work, wage disparities for equivalent or

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, Malém and Onagoruwa 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).

similar work to men's,¹³ and barriers to accessing managerial positions typically held by men (Goetz 2003, 35-58; Nartey *et al.* 2023, 9; Mittal 2022, 69-70). As effectively epitomised by Latin America, cultural expectations rooted in *machismo/marianismo* reinforce women's role as primary caregivers (Galanti 2003, Kumar 2014). Consequently, they bear a disproportionate burden of domestic unpaid work, spending an average of 38 hours per week on such tasks compared to 16 hours for men (Frisancho *et al.* 2023, 2). Upon entering the labour market, their "motherhood penalty" restricts their availability 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.* 2023, 4; Kumar 2014; Urquidi and Chalup 2023, 3,5).

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 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).

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, Lahoti, and Swaminathan 2021).

(1c) Unequal Access to Health (and Patriarchal Norms)

In the realm of healthcare, the unequal status of women within the family, coupled with limited material resources, accounts for considerable 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 (Vlassof 2007, 48, 53). This trend is accentuated by the stigma surrounding sexually transmitted conditions like HIV/AIDS, further compounded by inadequate access to contraceptives (Goldin and Katz 2000). 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).

It is paradoxical that patriarchal norms tightly constrain women to their reproductive and childbearing roles, yet the maternal mortality rate persists stubbornly high. In 2020, there were 287,000 maternal deaths recorded globally, with 99% occurring in ‘developing’ countries (WHO 2023, 3). 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, 15), 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).

1d) Lower Political Participation (And Patriarchal Norms)

Women’s political participation remains significantly low globally (Herre 2024). In ‘developing’ countries, the factors examined in the preceding subsections — limited education, low(er) economic resources, and the dual burden given by household duties — all account for gender inequality in political engagement, whether in parliaments, cabinet positions, or state leadership roles (*see* Badru 2005; Waylen 1996). When women have the educational and material resources, as well as the time, to participate in politics, they often encounter additional hurdles (*see* Shevdova 2005). Patriarchal norms, responsible for having “eulogized women’s role in the

private sphere” (Sabbagh 2005, 55), create resistance to female political visibility, often reinforced by prejudiced — and sometimes satirical — representations in mass media (*see* Maky 2015). Moreover, political obstacles persist, as the marginalisation of women in the private sphere has allowed the male political paradigm to dominate and shape the political arena according to their values, making it challenging for women to secure party support (Shevdova 2005, 35-38, Randall 2017, 141).

As testified by Sushma Swaray, former MP and Minister of External Affairs of India (2014-2019), “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 make up 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” (*in* Shvedova 2005, 38).

2) Yes, the Patriarchy (but Because of Colonialism)

Aiming to denounce the unequal status of women, Western feminist scholarship has undoubtedly served as a fundamental epistemological instrument for critiquing the (patriarchal) structures oppressing them, as thoroughly analysed in the previous section (*see* Abu-Lughod 2001, 107). However, when postcolonial feminists entered the discourse, their first-hand lived experience of disparity highlighted a critical flaw: engraving a “universal patriarchy” (Herr 2014, 4) as *the* factor accounting for gender inequality globally has led to the production of an abstract, homogenised, and essentialised narrative surrounding *the male-dominated Woman* which is oblivious to the “multiple and complex oppressions” of fleshly *women* living in ‘developing’ nation-states (Herr 2014, 2; *see also* Mohanty 2003, 19; Waylen 1996, 8). Indeed, in ‘developing’ societies, 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 and Russo 1991).

When delving further into the impacts of foreign rule, it becomes evident how women were subjected to a “double colonisation” (Oyewúmí 1997, 22). The first layer of this dual

subjugation consisted in the category of *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). 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)” (Oyewúmí 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). The role of colonialism in accounting for gender inequality within ‘developing’ nations is unequivocal when exploring the greater equality that women enjoyed 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 1986, 37). Similarly, Oyewúmí (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) (Jayeola and Isaac 2020). 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” (Oyewúmi 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 (Mies 1986, 92-93; McClintock 1995, 22). 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* Jayeola and Isaac 2020; Liddle and Joshi 1985; 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 *Smritis* (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 encouraged 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, Waylen (1996, 56) stresses how the introduction of cash crops for exports during the colonial era encouraged the reduced status of women: within the newly-introduced economic system, access to agriculture, technical expertise, and credit were granted to men. Women, in line with the analysis in section (1), were prodded to go through a process of “housewifisation” that ensured they retired 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 in ‘developing’ nation-states. 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 (Mohanty 2003, 246). Against this preliminary backdrop, in the next section, I will more adequately scrutinise how these developing policies account for the perpetuation of gender inequality in ‘developing’ countries.

3. Structural Adjustment Programs and Gender Inequality

After the 1970s oil price shocks and the 1980s world recession, the ‘developing’ world experienced significant economic turmoil marked by high inflation, declining export earnings, and deteriorating national incomes (Ali *et al.* 2003, 670). This created an opportune moment for the Bretton Woods Institutions to intervene and “rescue” these economies through the

introduction of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) (Morally 2020, 7). SAPs denote macroeconomic development policies designed for economic stabilisation by offering a “Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility Loan”, aimed at assisting debt-ridden (‘developing’) countries in mitigating foreign debt deficit (Campbell 2010, 2). These loans, dispensed by the World Bank and the IMF, are condition-based, i.e., tailored to the specific needs of recipient countries (IMF 2001, Sadasivam 1997, 630, 632). However, in a great neoliberal fashion, they uniformly pursue price stability, market deregulation, increased foreign investment, and the easing of restrictions on international trade (IMF 2001). Essentially, these policies permit Western economic powers to formally and legally influence the economy of signatory states.

The IMF claims that these programs aim to *equally* improve the economic conditions of *all* countries, *all* populations, and *all* genders (*ibid.*).¹⁵ However, despite this faceless and ostensibly gender-neutral intent, the reality often diverges significantly. Orthodox SAPs typically prioritise profit maximisation and the minimisation of governmental intervention through the privatisation of parastatal organisations and fiscal austerity strategies. The latter results in reducing — if not eliminating — government expenditures on food, health, and education (Campbell 2010, 2; Morally 2020, 7; Sadasivam 1997, 635). While the effects of SAPs are not uniformly negative across *all* countries, there is a common consequence: 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). Firstly, SAPs disrupt the balance between income and prices due to rising inflation, exacerbating poverty; given the entrenched (patriarchal) gender norms and roles extensively analysed in Section (1), women are often the first to be disadvantaged by gendered resource allocation schemes, which exclude them from education, healthcare, property, and housing (Ali *et al.* 2003, 677; Rai 2005, 242). Secondly, and more critically, the reduction or complete elimination of governmental expenditures effectively dismantles the safety nets that women rely on. The design of SAPs does not account 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

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.

primarily reinvested in the *unpaid* economies of reproduction and sustenance (Morally, 2020, 8); therefore, the overfocus on “the magic of the market” (Shah *et al.* 1994, 39) 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)¹⁶. Consequently, in times of scarcity within the household, women are urged to compensate by working harder “to generate family survival requirements” (Dunaway 2001, 14). Given the exclusion of “the personal” from the purview of SAPs, women disproportionately bear the costs of adjustment, 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 to *integrate* into the formal paid labour force to increase the earnings needed to supplement lost household income (Sadasivam, 1997, 638; Lindio-McGovern 2007, 286). Specifically, women are offered labour in newly-established large 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). While the establishment of EPZs is intended to increase foreign currency earnings and help governments repay debts, this solution masks significant drawbacks. 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” (*ibid.*, 649). This collusion between state and commercial interests leads to worker exploitation, with labour rights and regulations being circumvented, resulting in wages that are 10-20% of comparable work in ‘developed’ countries. While these capitalist-led exploitative practices affect all workers in EPZs, women labourers face greater inequality. Firstly, it is a matter of numbers: women constitute the majority of employers in EPZs,¹⁷ as they are deemed “docile” and *less* likely to contest unsafe labour conditions (Payer

¹⁶ Emphasis added.

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

1982, 156; Rai 2005, 243) and *more* likely to perform repetitive tasks with no opportunity for skill transfer (Payer 1982, 156; Sadasivam 1997, 643; Rai 2005, 243; Shah *et al.* 1994, 40). Secondly, 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. Indeed, this devaluation serves as an ideal¹⁸ for maximal surplus extraction: lower wages and longer working hours equate to exploitation for women — but a greater quantity of profitable goods for the (capitalist) market (Dunaway 2001, 20).

Besides overallocating energies and workloads onto women, the gendered division of labour accounts for further inequality in the agricultural sector, where SAPs advocate for a transition from import substitution to the cultivation of export-oriented cash crops. In this context, mirroring colonial times, men assume control over cash crop cultivation, while women are relegated to subsistence agriculture in marginal and less fertile lands (Ali *et al.* 2003, 673; Due and Gladwin, 1991; Sadasivam 1997, 640).

To recapitulate, the foundational tenets of SAPs — austerity measures, shifts towards export-led agriculture, and the employment of cheap female labour by TNCs — collectively account for gender inequality in ‘developing’ countries (where such policies are approved) primarily in five 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;¹⁹ (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

¹⁸ Ideal, patently, in capitalist terms.

¹⁹ It is possible to observe a gender poverty gap as well: as of 2021, 11 million more women than men live with less than \$1.90 per day, and this gender gap is expected to increase by 2030 (Statista 2024). Given this disparity, scholars often refer to this phenomenon in terms of “feminization of poverty” (e.g., Sadasivam 1997).

women makes it impossible to focus on higher education (limiting access to better jobs) and political participation.

Conclusive Remarks

By interweaving feminist debates, colonial pasts, and post-colonial presents within neoliberal policies, it is now clear(er) how women in ‘developing’ countries endure multi-layered oppressions. The analysis began by reflecting on the most recurrent (and misused) theme within feminist literature – the Patriarchy. This framework helped observe how the patriarchal public/private divide and the resulting gendered division of labour effectively account for gender inequality in ‘developing’ countries. However, such analysis would be truncated without considering that these patriarchal inequalities and marginalisations of ‘Third World’ Women were introduced or greatly exacerbated during colonisation. 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 (neo)colonial “ideology of the male breadwinner”, thus profiting from undervalued (i.e., cheaper) female work and perpetuating women’s unequal standing in society (Cho 2012, 30).

This intricate web of discrimination demonstrates that without addressing the patriarchal colonial roots and neoliberal perpetuation of gender inequalities, efforts to improve the status of women in ‘developing’ countries will remain fundamentally flawed. Indeed, following SAPs, the Bretton Woods Institutions have attempted to “mainstream” (i.e., incorporate) gender into their policies (Prügl 2017, 31; Sadasivam 1997, 647). However, Struckmann (2018) shows how these efforts are still deeply entrenched in neoliberal development models of capital accumulation. As seen above, such a system continues to account for two main issues: (1) the exclusion of women’s unpaid work, and, therefore, (2) the (re)production of (greater) gender inequality in ‘developing’ countries.

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