

# Exploring Challenges Faced by Women: Gendered Labour and Neoliberal Restructuring as Boundaries within Women's Lived Experiences of Poverty

---

**B**eginning from the late 1970s onwards, the era of neoliberal restructuring altered the role of the state and the market, which, alongside the gendered nature of household domestic labour, had detrimental consequences for women's experiences of poverty. Developments within macro political-economic policy throughout this era recommended and implemented free-market policies, trade deregulation and a *lassiez-faire* approach to government that encouraged a minimal state role in public service provision. Yet, in overlooking the disparity in the reliance of women in poverty and low-income environments on state provision of public services compared to men and undermining the impact these policies would have on women's income-generating opportunities, this approach intensified women's lived experiences of poverty and exacerbated women's vulnerability to becoming impoverished. The interactions of gendered labour and neoliberal restructuring during this time created boundaries that ultimately limited women's opportunities to escape poverty. Gendered labour refers to the gender constructions that traditionally assign women a disproportionate share of responsibilities within the household, which consequently taxes their time and labour and establishes constraints to women's capacity for earning an independent income. As neoliberal economics impose adjustment costs for poor households, an unequal proportion of these costs is imposed on women as they act as shock absorbers in times of economic hardship. Within the context of these

political-economic transformations, it becomes clear how neoliberal restructuring, gendered labour, and the interactions between these form boundaries that detrimentally alter the ways women live their lives. Firstly, the era of neoliberal restructuring is explained before an exploration into gender roles, gendered responsibilities and the ways in which these constitute borders that disproportionately disadvantage women living in poverty, specifically throughout the era of neoliberal restructuring.

The process of neoliberal restructuring began as the American government shifted from the dollar-gold standard after the decline of the Bretton Woods System and a new framework of international monetary regulation was created that was underpinned by liberal ideas of liberalised exchange rates, free international trade, and *lassiez-faire* government. Within this system, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank were created with the purpose of financing and lending money to member states to help their economic advancement and assist with economic adjustment. As the framework for these policies, neoliberalism can be defined as a political-economic theory that proposes societal advancement through 'liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework', recommending private property rights, free markets and free trade<sup>1</sup>. According to this logic, the state's limited role promotes market expansion, and it is the responsibility of free individuals to engage with the market to escape poverty and flourish.<sup>2</sup> Within this neoliberal approach to global monetary governance,

<sup>1</sup> D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> M. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty: Fully Updated and Revised*, (New York, 2013).

structural adjustment programs (SAP's) were introduced which gave loans to support countries experiencing economic crises. However, the institutions providing these loans also required receiving countries to implement specific policies, including increased privatisation, liberalization of trade and reducing state public spending. Despite receiving widespread support at the time, this neoliberal restructuring is widely criticised for its impact on the social sector and poverty within developing and low-income countries.

The historical period of neoliberal restructuring and the consequential implementation of SAP's generated limitations to women's ability to overcome poverty, ignoring the difference in men and women's experiences and as a result, negatively impacting the welfare of the women. Both the IMF and the World Bank have been decidedly male environments and in the period of the late twentieth century there was a large overrepresentation of men in senior positions<sup>3</sup>. The 1989 International Monetary Fund Annual Report has lengthy lists of its directors and senior officers, yet not surprisingly, the significant majority are men<sup>4</sup>. Karin Lissakers, a former American executive director of the IMF testified that the Bretton Woods institutions that founded the IMF and the World Bank were bastions of male supremacy, and that there lied an institutional problem of gender discrimination. Not only does the institutional element of this period of economic and historical change suffer from deep gender disparities of those in power, but also the theories that underpinned its implementation display a similar male-orientated bias. Theoretical underpinnings of neoliberalism in the twentieth century were founded and supported by well-known male academics, notably, Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and James Buchanan. These scholars raised widespread support for laissez-faire capitalism and neoliberal policies, and their influence led to a reduction in state provision of social and public services in an attempt to balance government debt. The male majority in both the theoretical academia of neoliberal theory and its institutional implementation into the contemporary economy

led to the formation of boundaries in women's lives that were not fully realised by the male-dominated establishments that imposed them.

The approach taken by the IMF and World Bank in the implementation of SAP's and their foundational neoliberal theory fatally ignores the significance of the gendered differentiation of the allocation of labour, resources and societal responsibilities to individuals within the household. Relying on limited poverty studies that research poverty on a household income basis, overlooking intra-household differentiation, neoliberalism and its economic implementation resulted in economic hardship, increases in certain areas of unemployment and reduced public service provision. This had detrimental consequences that both subjected more women to poverty and deepened the poverty that many women already experienced<sup>5</sup>. Neoliberal institutions in the late twentieth century endorsed a neoliberal approach to poverty eradication that wrongly assumed whole households experience the same poverty, misunderstanding the differential gender identity-dependent experiences of poverty within households. The approach also assumed that all members within the household have the same means, resources, and opportunities to mobilise their labour to escape poverty. These assumptions disregard the fact that the historical constructions of gender roles and historical biological determinism (the idea that social positions are informed by the biological and sexual difference in the genders) have given rise to a disproportionate division of labour that renders women less able to earn an independent income and therefore has disproportionately subjected them to a higher chance of experiencing poverty.

Throughout history, human socialisation has created a gendered, hierarchical dimension to our social reality. Socialisation of this gendered hierarchy was, and continues to be, informed by a purported biological determinism that is grounded in the bias that there is a natural dominance of men over women, perpetuating the belief that allocating women the responsibility of the social reproduction of the family is a natural extension of the

<sup>3</sup> A. Freidman, *50 Years On, 2 U.S. Officials Signal Shift: Women and Bretton Woods*. International Herald Tribune, (New York, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> International Monetary Fund, *Annual Report (International Monetary Fund)*, (1989).

<sup>5</sup> N. Kabeer, *Monitoring poverty as if gender mattered: a methodology for rural Bangladesh*, (Brighton, 1989).

biological division of labour within the household<sup>6</sup>. Social reproduction refers to the biological reproduction of the species and conditions of motherhood, the reproduction of the labour force and the reproduction and provisioning of the needs of the family<sup>7</sup>. Historical transformations in the way that society is organised have given rise to a sexual division of labour that forcibly separated and subordinated women's labour in the social reproduction of the family to a value much less than that of the accumulative labour outside of the household that generated surplus value which was generally appropriated by men<sup>8</sup>. These gender roles facilitated the normalisation of simultaneously allocating women disproportionate household and procreative labour, whilst subordinating this as unpaid labour because of its definition as a 'natural' extension of the female biology.

Through this division and hierarchization of gendered labour, significant disparity is created between men and women's opportunities, and the boundaries, to generate income within the context of poverty. For the poor, the mobilisation of the physical labour available to them is fundamental as a means of survival because often, physical labour is the only resource at their disposal<sup>9</sup>. However, the labour demanded by processes within social reproduction weakens the capacity of women to utilise the same means as men to escape poverty. Women, due to the patriarchal bias that defines women's reproductive labour as 'natural' under capitalism, are assigned responsibilities of biological reproduction, unpaid production in the home, social provision, reproduction of culture and ideology and the provision of sexual, emotional and affective services required for intimate relationships<sup>10</sup>. Due to the strict fiscal policies of the neoliberal era, women were often forced to balance

both mobilisations in the productive labour force to earn income and their gendered responsibilities in the household. Thus, the societal norm that assigns women as the main caregiver for the family consequently taxes their time and labour, forming a limiting boundary to their ability for earning an independent wage<sup>11</sup>. In the balance of both finding income to contribute to household needs and maintaining the labour of social reproduction, the demands of these unpaid responsibilities crucially impact women's physical energy, time, and emotional capacity to mobilise further labour productively through avenues that would provide a substantial income. Thus, forced to expend a disproportionate amount of time and labour in the household, women are limited in their ability to generate personal income via a wage and overcome the conditions of poverty. In developing countries, women spend double the amount of time as men on household labour, and four times as much time on caregiving<sup>12</sup>.

Despite already constituting a significant boundary, women's gendered responsibilities were reinforced and forcibly intensified by the neoliberal project to restructure the government role in the public sphere in developing and low-income countries. As the debt crisis took hold of developing countries in Latin America and parts of Africa in the 1980s, the IMF and the World Bank manipulated the economic direction of these states towards free-market, *lassiez-faire* neoliberal systems. As a result, governments were tied into structural adjustment programmes which forcibly reduced the state's role in the provision of social welfare services, limited public expenditure and encouraged the deregulation of labour and markets. The shift away from the welfare state approach underpinned the neoliberal idea that state welfare provision disincentivises the poor and encourages

<sup>6</sup> M. Mies, & S. Federici, *Patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale: Women in the international division of labour*, (London, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> I. Bakker, *Social Reproduction and the Constitution of a Gendered Political Economy*, (2007), pp 541-556.

<sup>8</sup> S. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, (New York, 2004); I. Bakker, & S. Gill, *Rethinking power, production, and social reproduction: Toward variegated social reproduction*, (2019) pp 503-523.

<sup>9</sup> N. Kabeer, *Gender, poverty, and inequality: a brief history of feminist contributions in the field of international development*, *Gender & Development*, (2015) pp. 189-205.

<sup>10</sup> C. Hoskyns, & S. Rai, *Recasting the Global Political Economy: Counting Women's Unpaid Work*, (2007) pp. 297-317.

<sup>11</sup> I. Palmer, *Public finance from a gender perspective*, (1995).

<sup>12</sup> M. Berniell, and C. Sánchez-Páramo, *Overview of Time Use Data Used for the Analysis of Gender Differences in Time Use Patterns*, (Washington, 2011); E. Duflo, *Women empowerment and economic development*, (2012) pp. 1051-1079.

laziness in the labour force<sup>13</sup>. Disregarding the inequality in intra-household relations in terms of income and labour, this approach contributed to the formation of even more boundaries facing women in poor and low-income areas.

As state provision of social services is withdrawn, women were forced to devote further time and labour to this unpaid area of domestic work because, as female-identified labour, it is perceived as a natural extension of the women's biological nature<sup>14</sup> (Roberts, 2004). Having a double effect, the debt crisis within developing countries and the impacts of neoliberal structural adjustment policies influenced not only income levels, but also income distribution and consumption distribution within the household. Women, as the main caregiver, created coping mechanisms in reaction to these shocks that deepened their poverty disproportionately to men. Firstly, the quality and consumption of food by women and children reduced to prioritise male consumption as household income became limited due to increased unemployment levels<sup>15</sup>. Secondly, in his study Heltberg also found a rise in domestic violence against women that directly correlated with the emotional strain of reduced monetary incomes<sup>16</sup>. Thirdly, household assets were often sold to generate money for survival and women's property was generally sold first, reducing their independent assets for stability in future economic shocks<sup>17</sup>. Finally, due to the economic hardship of privatisations, unemployment and currency crises, women were forced to expend even more of their time and labour to participate in the productive wage-labour force, harming their physical and mental well-being.

Furthermore, the income earning potential for women in poverty is further defined by

the limits of the set of resources available, and the interactions they experience to acquire income which is consistently limited by gendered labour, and were exacerbated throughout the neoliberal era<sup>18</sup>. For women trapped in poverty, social capital and income potential are restricted by deprived neighbourhoods, scarce social resources, limited interaction with only their social class and restricted capacity for mobility. Women's lives become an enclosed complex through which only limited, if any, low-income opportunities, connections and information could be derived. Therefore, initial inequalities between women's capacity for independent income are constantly reproduced because of the constraints of living in poverty.

Analysis of women's lived experiences in developing and low-income countries serves to reveal the damaging boundaries created by neoliberal restructuring and gendered labour, and the interactions between these, on women's lives throughout this era. Women were demanded to extend their labour both in the household to substitute for the reduced state role in public services, but also in the labour market to contribute to the reduced household income as a result of contemporary economic crises and strict fiscal adjustments demanded by SAP's. Women's lives saw extensive negative impacts as they became the central shock absorbers of new economic and political shocks. Ultimately, extensive boundaries were set that limited women's ability to escape poverty.



**Alice Addison**

Durham University Undergraduate

<sup>13</sup> C. Murray, *Losing ground: American social policy, 1950-1980*, (New York, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> S. Roberts, 'Gendered globalizations', In: Staeheli L., Kofman E. and Peake L. (eds) *Mapping Women, Making Politics: Feminist Perspectives on Political Geography*, (New York, 2004), pp. 127-140.

<sup>15</sup> R. Heltberg, N. Hossain, A. Reva, and C. Turk, *Anatomy of coping. Evidence from people living through the crises of 2008-2011*, (Washington, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> R. Heltberg, *Anatomy of Coping*.

<sup>17</sup> C. Moser, 'The impact of recession and adjustment policies at the micro-level: low income women and their households in Guayquil, Ecuador', in UNICEF (ed.) *Poor Women and the Economic Crisis. The Invisible Adjustment*, (Santiago, 1989) pp. 137-62.

<sup>18</sup> R. Das, *Social capital and poverty of the wage-labour class: Problems with the social capital theory*, (2002) pp. 27-45; R. Peet, *Inequality and Poverty: A Marxist-Geographic Theory*, (1975) pp 564-571; R. Putnam, *Making democracy work* (Princeton, 1993).

## Bibliography

- Bakker, Isabella, 'Social Reproduction and the Constitution of a Gendered Political Economy', *New Political Economy*, Vol.12 No.4, (2007), pp.541-556.
- Bakker, Isabella and Gill, Stephen, 'Rethinking power, production, and social reproduction: Toward variegated social reproduction', *Capital & Class*, Vol.43 No.4, (2019), pp.503-523.
- Berniell, María Inés and Sánchez-Páramo, Carolina, 'Overview of Time Use Data Used for the Analysis of Gender Differences in Time Use Patterns', *Background paper for the WDR 2012*, (2011).
- Das, Raju, 'Social capital and poverty of the wage-labour class: Problems with the social capital theory', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol.29 No.1, (2002) pp.27-45.
- Duflo, Esther, 'Women empowerment and economic development', *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol.50 No.4, (2012) pp. 1051-1079.
- Federici, Silvia, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Penguin, New York, (2004).
- Freidman, Alan, '50 Years On, 2 U.S. Officials Signal Shift: Women and Bretton Woods', *International Herald Tribune*, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/30/business/worldbusiness/IHT-50-years-on-2-us-officials-signal-shift-women-and.html>, (1994).
- Harvey, David, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, New York, (2005).
- Heltberg, Rasmus, Hossain, Naomi, Reva, Anna, and Turk, Carolyn 'Anatomy of coping. Evidence from people living through the crises of 2008-2011', *Policy Research Working Paper*, (2012).
- International Monetary Fund, *International Monetary Fund Annual Report 1989 of the Executive Board*, Available at: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/cat/longres.aspx?sk=27702>, (1989).
- Kabeer, Naila, 'Gender, poverty, and inequality: a brief history of feminist contributions in the field of international development, Gender & Development', *Gender & Development*, Vol.23 No.2, (2015), pp.189-205.
- Kabeer, Naila, *Monitoring poverty as if gender mattered: a methodology for rural Bangladesh*, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, (1989).
- Katz, Michael B., *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty*, Oxford University Press, New York, (2013).
- Mies, Maria and Federici, Silvia, *Patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale: Women in the international division of labour*, Zed Books, London, (2014).
- Moser, Caroline, 'The impact of recession and adjustment policies at the micro-level: low income women and their households in Guayquil, Ecuador' in UNICEF (ed.), *Poor Women and the Economic Crisis. The Invisible Adjustment*, Santiago, (1989), pp.137-62.
- Murray, Charles, 'Losing ground: American social policy 1950-1980', *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, Vol.19 No.2, (1994).
- Palmer, Ingrid, 'Public finance from a gender perspective', *World Development*, Vol.23 No.11, (1995).
- Putnam, Robert, *Making democracy work*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, (1993).
- Peet, Richard, 'Inequality and Poverty: A Marxist-Geographic Theory', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol.65 No.4, (1975), pp.564-571.
- Roberts, Susan, 'Gendered globalizations' in L. Staeheli and E. Kofman and L. Peake (eds.), *Mapping Women, Making Politics: Feminist Perspectives on Political Geography*, New York (2004), pp.127-140.