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Feminism as a Moral Imperative in a Globalised World

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Feminism: A Definition and Motivation

Let me begin by telling you what is wrong with the world. Turn on the television in 2015, and what do you see? An overwhelming under-representation of women. Brutal despots, religious extremists, vengeful mass shootings, merciless occupying armies. Where are the women? Wouldn't it be a bittersweet surprise to see some women calling for protesters to be shot, targeting their own civilians, enforcing draconian religious law, invading foreign lands, committing genocide? Wouldn't that make for a more equal sort of world? Isn't equality what we are aiming for? The answer is no, obviously not. So the first point I want to make is a very crude one. Feminism is not about placing more women in the contexts in which we see powerful men. That's bullshit feminism. And I say this because I'm growing tired of hearing about a kind of feminism that seems to be exciting to a new generation of young middle-class careerists (especially in universities), a kind of feminism whose clarion call is for more women in board rooms. There's been an upsurge of this kind of "feminism" lately. It calls for more women CEOs, more women leading international financial institutions, more women directors of NGOs and elite, corporatised universities. This "lean in" feminism, which tells us that women should also be grabbing their slice of the pie, is no feminism at all. For me, calling for women in the board room isn't a great deal different from calling for more women in the murderous high ranks of the IDF, or more women strategising for the imperial ambitions of the US. They're all up to no good, and the very existence of these nodes of power is directly implicated in the suffering and disempowerment of most women and men. That kind of feminism is mostly just lazy, but often it's outright pernicious.

But do not read me wrong: this is not an anti-feminism essay. Rather, I wish to bring to the fore some of the problems we face as feminists in a globalised world, and attempt to reconnect the movement with the moral foundations from which its mandate derives.

So, first, what do I mean by feminism? Feminism has two components, a *descriptive* and a *normative* component. The descriptive component states that we live in a patriarchal world, in which women are subject to systematic oppression, *as women*. The normative component states that this is not morally acceptable, and we should work to challenge and undermine those patriarchal structures.

To make these structures explicit, two major features of patriarchy are that: (a) women are primary caregivers in a world in which caregiving is not valuable; (b) women are objectified, embodied, and hyper-sexualised in a world in which sex is seen as bad and dirty. Further, patriarchy teaches us that women are these things *by nature*.

But these structures do not stand alone: they have increasingly received substantial backing from economic forces, who have seized an opportunity to entwine fiscal and social considerations and entrench both. Feminism has been *recuperated* by capitalism. Recuperation (cf. Debord, 1957) occurs when a dominant ideology co-opts and distorts an idea which had radical, transformative potential. Gender, and its associated oppressive norms, have come to be presented as an *individual* burden, to be handled according to one's

personal choices. If my gender hurts me, that's my problem. If your gender hurts you, that's *your* problem. That tends to make us very judgmental in our relations with ourselves and each other, to start with, but it also means that it makes sense that I deal with my issues and leave you to yours as though the two are not connected. And so, in time, it begins to seem that the two are not connected. Gender oppression becomes the responsibility (and, therefore, the *fault*) of each individual person. Women therefore face an illusory choice; their gender has become their private burden. In effect, one's socialised gender becomes one's personal property to be addressed in isolation, and to take individual responsibility for when we inevitably fail to make its deleterious effects subside.

Contemporary feminist theory in the postmodern vein rightly focusses on the particularity of women's experiences, and troubles the idea of a univocal "woman," but the result is sometimes a diminishing of the importance of solidarity in favour of a useless atomism, resulting in a failure to comprehend patriarchy as a pervasive global phenomenon evolving in symbiosis with capitalism.

In this sense, "gender" has been appropriated and reformulated from a political foothold into a mere "empty signifier of the good" (Fraser, 2009, p.4) which has been slotted neatly into the PR campaign of neoliberalism. You now see gender *this*, and gender *that*, and as long as someone says gender at some point, there is a sense that an ill-understood, but necessary duty, has been met. In this sense, it has the panacea quality of "diversity" or "multiculturalism." "Equal opportunity" has come to mean "equal opportunity to participate in the accumulation of capital for others," synonymous with a new kind of economic double bind, since the policies that ostensibly target gender inequality in fact dovetail with economic reorganisation which places novel and additional burdens on women. At the heart of it, those claiming to strive for gender equality at the global policy level work in the service of a broader campaign to induce deregularisation, competition, and marketisation. Within this paradigm, women subsist in the growing ghetto of low-wage, precarious employment, while being burdened with rising levels of care work to keep up with increasing privatisation.

Feminism may well be at an important juncture. If it is not reconnected with its ethical roots soon, its urgency will be lost to the fashionable wasteland of over-handled, threadbare postmodern theory. Academics are not blameless: our theoretical abstractions have a lot to answer for. The tools for liberation must of course be scaffolded by theoretical work, since they must be refined and continually be the subject of critique, but we should be wary of making them so fine-grained that they are sifted away and picked up downstream to be refashioned into new forms of oppression. Theoretical work on gender must be embedded in praxis, or it is existentially vulnerable, and may entirely lose its force to achieve its motivating objectives.

As academics and activists, we must be more discerning with where we place our efforts as feminists. Feminism cannot be focused on inserting more women where men are now, either to replace or accompany them. That would only be worthwhile if those locations were themselves defensible, and good for communities as a whole. For the most part, they are not. Nor can feminism be invested in women taking their share of power structures, or avenging past and current injustices. But neither is feminism about theorising over

gender as a disembodied, unsituated object of study. Gender is, no doubt, a gear of injustice, but its traction is through its contact with other gears, and we must start by examining what the whole machine produces, and how it may be stopped. So, most importantly of all, feminism cannot exist in isolation. It needs active allies in ideologies whose aim is to reconstruct the global economy more equitably, and challenge racism and border imperialism.

Creating women workers who participate in the global economy on the same (or worse) losing terms as the men of their communities is *not* liberation. Permitting greater numbers of women to participate in corporate decision-making is *not* liberation. All too often, what is described as liberation is really just outsourced oppression. Groups who enjoy privileges along other axes (class, race, nationality) can often find safe intersections from which to outsource their gender oppression to another location, while leaving global patriarchy intact. A genuine feminism would never in its wildest dreams settle for justice for some women at the expense of others.

So in the remainder of this essay I want to make a very blunt point: the battles we must fight in the name of gender are necessarily global, because all of our lives, in so many ways, are now embroiled with globalisation. Making gains at the expense of other women, or at the expense of poor or racialised communities is no victory: it is a way of passing the buck that is inconsistent with the values that give feminism its mandate.

Globalising Oppression

The globalisation of trade in the last few decades has been realised through the formation of intergovernmental organisations and global banks, creating a budding superstructure whose aim is the creation of international markets. This has been unambiguously negative for the world's poorest communities, whose poverty deepens even as the upper bound of wealth in their countries has risen. We continue to see increasing wealth concentration as tax havens, free trade, and lower public spending have widened the gap between rich and poor. Consumerism has replaced citizenship, communities have been uprooted due to economic migration and have been sidelined for the development of the global economy. Corporations have become the new subjects of justice claims, with an alarming sense of self-righteousness. It no longer makes sense to claim that things are “unfair” if the subject of that claim is merely a person or a community.

There are a number of angles along which globalisation has a disproportionately negative impact on women of the poorer nations. I will discuss six such ways here, drawing on the seminal and comprehensive work of Alison Jaggar (e.g. 2014).

1. Feminization of Labour

Amid trade expansion, jobs which were previously paid a living wage in the Global North have been relocated to low-wage regions of the Global South. A new industrial working class of poor women has come about in export processing zones, generally in Asia. Racism and sexism have played a central role in facilitating this move, with Asian governments enticing foreign corporate investors with the prospect of docile, industrious, desperate women who will be easily satisfied with tedious, unrewarding work, and whose bodies have been hyper-sexualised by the global pornography industry. The same is true in new sectors of the immigrant populations of the Global North. These jobs, though full-time, are seen as supplementary, since the capitalist logic (if it may be called such a thing) is also a patriarchal logic. Women are assumed to be merely topping up the salaries of their breadwinner partners, even though in most cases there are no such earning partners to speak of. As such, the jobs have low security, often have zero-hour contracts, and are very poorly paid. Sexual harassment is rife in such workplaces, where desperate poverty, coupled with a lack of unionisation, means such acts invariably go unchallenged.

2. Export Agriculture

As trade has been globalised, export agriculture has become a major international industry. Alongside this, deregulation has facilitated the relaxation of trade rules, permitting corporations to sell cheap agricultural supplies to the Global South. The vast majority of the world's farmers are women, so they have been most acutely affected. Small scale and subsistence agriculture have suffered badly, and many women farmers have been forced off the land and into new informal economies, where low-wages and poor working conditions are the order of the day. Many women driven into urban centres have no viable option for survival but sex work.

3. Structural Adjustment

Almost all Global South countries have substantial external debts to Global North countries and international financial institutions. In order to obtain additional loans to meet their needs, Global South countries are expected to undergo "structural adjustment." In simple terms, this means that an international financial institution permits an indebted country to borrow more money on the condition that they commit to becoming more "market-oriented." This typically includes lowering wages, increasing the price of daily necessities, and decimating public services. Who bears the brunt of these changes? Women. Since societies assign women primary care-taking responsibilities, the destruction of public services—which make care-taking easier—hits them hardest. Moreover, daughters are very often withdrawn from education in order to help their mothers make up the short-fall, trapping a new generation of girls into a cycle of poverty.

The statistics paint a grim picture of how this restructuring is designed to benefit creditor states. An economic thinktank (Global Financial Integrity, 2013) demonstrated that “even after you account for all types of financial flows (both legitimate and illegitimate)—including investment, remittances, debt forgiveness, and natural resource exports—Africa is a net creditor to the world.” Don't be fooled: the “poor” Global South is developing the rest of the world. And on top of the low-paid wage slavery of men and women in Global South countries, labour and social value is extracted from women in the unpaid work that maintains households and communities so that more paid labour can be extracted.

4. Militarism

The global arms trade continues to flourish, and (whether as a cause or a consequence), the world now exists in a perpetual state of war. Whilst men are the primary combatants in most wars, most of the casualties of war are women and children, who stand to gain very little from conflict, but comprise 80% of subsequent refugees. In addition, rape and domestic violence rise in times of conflict, and in post-conflict societies women are invariably subject to more repressive gender norms as pre-war “normality” is enforced more resolutely against the perceived threat of change and instability.

5. Sexualisation

Globalisation has facilitated and entrenched the rise of a global sex industry. Pornography is now amongst the world's most lucrative industries, and could not have been given a finer gift than the internet. The rise and rise of pornography has accelerated and globalised the sexualisation of women. Sex trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation is now the fastest growing criminal enterprise in the world (98% of those trafficked are women and girls). For some countries in Asia and the Caribbean, local economies are critically dependent on sex work as their primary source of income. While prostitution is by no means new, the disintegration of rural communities and migration to cities, coupled with poverty, have exacerbated the desperation that forces women into prostitution, and prevents them from leaving.

6. Environmental Degradation

In the last fifty years our planet has undergone alarming rates of irreversible degradation. This includes pollution of air, water, and soil, desertification, the disruption of ecosystems, and the extinction of wildlife. There can no longer be any doubt that these changes are caused by aggressive, irresponsible human “development,” and that the major culprits are industries whose profits are reaped in the Global North, and military activity enacted by the Global North. Again, poor women are disproportionately burdened by environmental destruction as they deal with the fall-out of food, water and fuel shortages, along with the many

diseases caused by proximity to pollution and toxins.

A Regional Case Study: Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon

Migrant domestic work in Lebanon is a paradigm example of the way in which women's "liberation" is premised on the creation of new workforce to which "women's work" has been outsourced. Under capitalism, it seems there will always be "women" just as there will always be the poor. In a globalised world, the poorest women become the world's women.

Lebanon is often noted for its progressive social standards within the region, particularly with regard to employment and education opportunities for women. In Lebanon, as elsewhere, this "liberation" is chiefly enjoyed by women of the wealthy, powerful classes, whose quality and variety of work and leisure is premised on the influx of foreign women who are sufficiently poor to readily perform the aspects of day-to-day life that wealthier people would rather outsource. The stark injustice of the daily reality of one group of people serving another is facilitated by carefully maintained racism towards these women, and justified by careless capitalist rhetoric ("at least she has a job") that reinforces, rather than challenges, the global economic order.

Migrant domestic work has been described by sociologist Arlie Hochschild as a "global heart transplant," as "care" and "love" are commodified and exported from poorer nations to wealthier nations. Demographics in wealthier nations change as more women participate in the full-time workforce. Concurrently, poorer nations can benefit from the remittances of sending labour abroad and collecting taxes from income sent home. The wealthy nations' "care crisis" is resolved by the migration of carers, leaving behind a care deficit in the sending nations, which produces additional labour (either unpaid, or paid at much lower rates) for the women who are left behind. This undoubtedly constitutes a moral harm against the communities exporting care.

Care is then extracted from the sending nation to the receiving nation at a great loss to the former. Global South nations, in their attempts to repay national debts, undergo economic restructuring, resulting in the diversion of funds away from public services. As a result, public services deteriorate rapidly. This includes childcare provision, care for the elderly, medical care, and basic daily infrastructure such as public transport. Women, as primary caregivers, are most adversely affected by these restructuring, for they must make up the shortfall by reorganising family life with fewer external resources, and working harder to meet the new unmet needs of their dependents, often while balancing their own paid work. In some cases, an obvious way to do this is to migrate in order to earn a higher salary in a wealthier country.

Lebanon is host to a quarter of a million migrant domestic workers. The practice has exceeded mere social acceptability and become a veritable middle-class aspiration. Domestic workers are "sponsored" through the "Kafala" legal framework, through which households import foreign workers, who reside within the employer's home with no legal right to remain in the country if their employment contract is terminated, and no recourse

to rights such as sick leave, a minimum wage, and fixed working hours. The statistics in Lebanon are a national embarrassment. In 99% of cases, migrant domestic workers are denied their freedom of movement (which in some cases involves the removal of passports and other identification, and in a third of cases means being confined to the home), two-thirds work eleven-hours each day, more than half are verbally abused, and a third work a full week without a day's break. Human Rights Watch estimates that one migrant domestic worker dies each week in Lebanon, noting that the majority of the cases are classified as suicide, or as accidental deaths while fleeing from employers or escaping confinement.

As I write, the migrant domestic workers of Lebanon are engaging in a protracted struggle for the recognition of their newly formed labour union, the first of its kind in this region. This, if successful, will be an enormous landmark for the rights of migrant domestic workers worldwide.

Pragmatic goals such as unionisation are undoubtedly worthy short-term aims; the working conditions of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon are in urgent need of improvement. But my personal view is that, regardless of how working conditions may improve, outsourced domestic work is intrinsically morally problematic. Domestic work in-residence is “affective labour;” it requires the maintenance of an *affect*: an emotional front that is independent of the worker's felt emotions, and directed towards optimising the employers' emotional wellbeing. The domestic worker is expected to exude gratefulness, present a cheerful countenance, and in general strive to direct her outward emotions towards producing an emotionally comfortable environment for the other members of the household, in part to offset or conceal the obvious power dynamic and her awareness of it. In effect, she is called upon to perform her part within a communal constructed reality in which her *personhood* is necessarily secondary to the personhood of those around her. She, and the group of working class women of colour from the Global South to which she belongs, is instrumentalised as a means to their ends in ways that will never be reversed; her value depends on the extent to which satisfies them in this capacity.

For these reasons, legislative improvements will only ever be the sugar to a very bitter pill. The shameful picture in Lebanon is observed elsewhere, where hierarchies of race, gender, and nationality are allied in the the service of borders whose purpose is increasingly limited to the protection and mobilisation of capital, at the expense of “citizens.”

Feminism as a Moral Imperative

We must resist the market forces that are turning gender into a personal matter, and creating a new pseudo-feminism within which the loudest voices are those of white, middle-class feminists, who, with their myopic standpoints, have invariably use their platforms to create obfuscating academic theory, or to further their own personal ambitions. More than ever, we need to fight to ensure that the personal really is political in the broadest, most radical, sense. This means seeing that every aspect of our lives is implicated in a complex

global drama, and the tragedy is almost always unfolding elsewhere.

Everyone reading is doing so on a phone or computer some of whose components were very likely made by a woman in a factory shrouded in suicide nets. Everyone is wearing at least one item of clothing produced in a sweatshop, probably in Bangladesh, by a woman who sleeps 16 to a room and works 16 hours a day for less than a dollar. Everyone today has eaten food which was either directly prepared, processed, or produced by women of colour. Everyone has probably today benefited from a workplace, recreational facility, or study environment that was made clean and tidy by a migrant women of colour. Some of the people reading this were partly raised by women whose own personal lives have been put on hold in order to send remittances to a home that is struggling under the weight of a new globalised poverty. Importantly, almost none of those women can afford the electronics, clothing, food, or domestic help that they provide to the rest of the world. That is capitalism's greatest and meanest trick.

The globalised world in which we live in such comfort and excess rests heavily on the underpaid, undervalued labour of a new and growing global proletariat of impoverished women of colour. It's not that no-one else is working, it's just that no-one else is working under such grossly unfavourable and precarious conditions, with so immediate a threat of instability, violence, and abuse, and no-one else in the world is quite so invisible, or their work so thankless. The women I have described quite literally produce, and reproduce, the world we live in.

A feminism without due regard for global gender injustice is a feminism we should categorically reject. That doesn't mean that local, specific battles should not be fought: they too are important, and the way in which patriarchy taints all of our lives is no small matter. Moreover, without resistance on smaller scales, we will never summon the hope, the experience, and the networks of solidarity to challenge that most ferocious form of patriarchy whose henchman is neoliberal economics, driven by the idea that profits come before people.

So what do I mean by a moral imperative? I'll make a comparison. I'd wager that every person reading this would unhesitatingly claim to be morally outraged by racism. Now obviously that's an ideal, not a reality: we are all racist in our own ways (many of which overlap because that's how racism works: it's structural), but I would hope that no-one reading this would *claim* to be anything other than an anti-racist, and I hope we're all striving to meet that. I'd also wager that readers would claim to be anti-poverty; it seems uncontroversially morally defensible to be opposed to the prison of hunger, malnutrition, disease, boredom, and anxiety that is inescapable for two-thirds of the world under the current economic order. Yet well-meaning people regularly claim not to be feminists. Whether that's because they have had the misfortune of encountering only the bullshit feminism I described at the start, or because they are otherwise misinformed about what feminism really means, or because they don't want to confront their own privilege or admit that our societies degrade and silence half of their members, I don't know. What I do know is that when you understand what real feminism is, and the global conditions which give it such urgency, you'll see at a glance why no other moral position is supportable.

References

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