
Interventions

CONTEMPORARY LEFT ISSUES IN AFRICA

ISSUE 03

Love or Labour? The Invisible Wheel that Turns the World

Joanita Najjuko and Crystal Simeoni argue for greater inclusion of the perspectives of women and girls as well as better recognition of their needs in macro-level economic decision-making. They demand feminist economic justice, show how unpaid care work is central to our economies and encourage resistance against the co-option of gender-based initiatives by neoliberalism.

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LOVE OR LABOUR?
THE INVISIBLE WHEEL
THAT TURNS THE
WORLD

BY JOANITA NAJJUKO AND
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Introduction

Neoliberal economic practices have accelerated since the 1980s, which has resulted in financial crises, austerity measures, the closing of civil society spaces, and excessive inequality. Extractive and exploitative neoliberal capitalism has made it possible to: modify laws, deregulate labour rights, privatise natural resources and essential services, and liberalise trade, investment, and financial flows, transforming our society and economy, and essentially creating the financialisation of life.

These conventional macro-level economic decisions that focus on scarcity of resources, selfishness of decisions by actors, and competition as a driver of growth and advancement, fail to recognise the abundance, care, altruism, and co-operation we may witness in life.¹ What was formerly a social contract between state and citizen is now a contract between state and private finance, private finance that often comes from the Global North with the face of a white man. By working this way, conventional macro-level economic models and their ideologies are cementing gender inequality and all other forms of inequality.

In 2015, income inequality globally was at its highest level in the past half century, while in Africa, the richest 0.0001% owned 40% of Africa's wealth.² Five years later, in 2020, it was reported that the world's 22 richest men owned more wealth than the 325 million women in Africa combined.³ The COVID-19 global pandemic spotlighted neoliberal capitalism's weaknesses as the 'accepted' economic system, providing ground for renewed critiques of the model.⁴ Public health systems and inadequate social safety nets struggled to cope globally alongside evidence of the deep, structurally unequal impacts of the crisis.⁵

Feminist policy analysis has always highlighted the inherent inequities embedded in the market-driven rationale, showing how gendered economic inequalities deepen on the back of these models globally. Despite the obvious flaws in neoliberal economic models, most countries remain wedded to these now orthodox economic trajectories. This embrace is encouraged through globalised economic influences wielded by powerful international institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and a range of Global North donors.

African women, as some of the most economically vulnerable, are perpetually in the eye of economic storms. Although women's economic empowerment (WEE) has garnered increased attention in mainstream gender and development agendas, the focus has tended to be limited to micro-level economic analysis and interventions, and macro-level policies on employment and livelihoods. Interventions for women and girls usually aim to support them to compete equally in existing markets. Less commonly, do they engender transformational shifts in access to

and control over economic resources, promote access to decent work, enable women to have control over their own time, and offer meaningful participation in economic decision-making from the household level to international institutions and policy spaces.

This development orientation has created an additional depoliticising effect. Although the call for economic empowerment was initially driven by the women's rights agenda, WEE has increasingly been appropriated by mainstream development thinking which centres the individualisation of economic aims, most notably, by prioritising women's entrepreneurialism and market access.⁶ This individualised focus is problematic. Apart from ignoring the realities of structural inequalities within markets themselves, themes of individualism and competition between economic actors now dominate the discussion, pushing aside investment in and validation of alternative models such as those based on economic solidarity and redistributive resourcing.⁷

AT THE LOCAL LEVEL, A FEMINIST SOCIAL CONTRACT WOULD RECOGNISE THE EFFECTS OF POWER ON GENDER ROLES AND SOCIAL RELATIONS THROUGH THE GOVERNANCE OF WOMEN'S DAILY LIVES.

We need a feminist social contract

Political economist Bhumika Muchhala asserts that the basis of a feminist social contract is rooted in structural feminism which involves an intentional shift from viewing women as individuals, to viewing gender as a system structuring unequal power relations, distribution, voice, and rights.⁸ Furthermore, a feminist social contract seeks to interrogate, unsettle, and ultimately dismantle power dynamics constructed within colonial, patriarchal, racial, and capitalist hierarchies of humanity. At the local level, a feminist social contract would recognise the effects of power on gender roles and social relations through the governance of women's daily lives.

On the global stage, Muchhala asserts that a social contract that centres gender equality would inform economic and trade governance, militarism and securitisation, migration, financialisation, climate justice, sexuality and reproduction, poverty, agriculture, movement building, religious fundamentalism, and political systems. Structural feminism is a critical foundation for a feminist economics methodology that moves the unpaid care economy to the centre of economic discussions and disrupts patriarchal belief systems that maintain a gendered division of labour. Feminist economic justice involves approaches that counter the myriad channels through which gender inequality is reinforced, and relied upon, in the processes of deregulating, liberalising, and privatising economies.

Social reproduction and the care economy

Unpaid care work in the sphere of social reproduction is defined as a 'non-market economy of social provisioning, supplying services directly concerned with the daily and intergenerational reproduction of people as human beings, especially through their care, socialisation, and education.'⁹ The labour of care includes housework, preparing meals, caring for persons with disabilities, people who are ill or older family members, and birthing, raising, and educating children. Across most African communities, care work is unpaid and not viewed as labour, but as 'love' and the 'natural' biological role of women. Even when care work is paid, the shared reality is that economies and societies depend deeply on the socially assigned care work undertaken by women.

THE VALUE OF UNPAID CARE WORK PERFORMED BY WOMEN GLOBALLY IN 2019 WAS CALCULATED AT ALMOST \$11 TRILLION

The core pursuit of feminist economics is achieving the three Rs of unpaid labour – recognition, reduction, and redistribution. Critical to this endeavour is the recognition of how care creates and maintains the labour force through social reproduction. Relational inequalities structure social reproduction. For instance, in rural communities, girls are dissuaded from attending school and directed to focus on household chores, while boys are encouraged to pursue education and paid work. These predetermined life trajectories are reinforced through patriarchal gender

norms that govern women's autonomy and bodies, from their status in the home to their place in the broader economy.

The value of unpaid care work performed by women globally in 2019 was calculated at almost \$11 trillion.¹⁰ While this may still be an underestimation, it is greater than the individual global domestic products (GDP) of all but four countries. This profound number clearly quantifies the massive subsidy that unpaid care work provides to the world economy, sustaining the human workforce for free. Yet, care work is generally absent from conventional measures of economic production, such as GDP. Even when women do participate in waged labour, it is often exploitative, underpaid, and precarious.

The nature of care work in developing countries is linked in multiple ways to public services, social policies and infrastructure, encompassing health, education, social protection, labour market laws, as well as care-related infrastructure like water and sanitation. When economies support care work through public expenditure on services and infrastructure, it can lead to a reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work, in turn expanding the agency and aggregate wellbeing of women.

For instance, in 2017, the Cape Verdean government approved a National Care Plan.¹¹ This National Care System represents an integrated model of co-responsibility for care among families, the state, and the community and is a significant step towards building a framework for transformative changes in women's lives, in social and family welfare, and gender equality.¹² One of the first National Plan for Care activities was the creation of a category for children and dependent caregivers (such as elders and people with disabilities) in the most vulnerable settings who would be offered universal care.

Such a transformative tenor of care-centred economic policy has ripple effects, it raises current and future productivity and aggregate demand for goods and services. It also fulfils the economic and social human rights of women in the form of enhanced education and decent work opportunities, long-term health, including reproductive and maternal health, resilience as well as governance, accountability, and engaged participation of women in the economy and society.

This women's work

While women's labour force participation rate in sub-Saharan Africa is 65%, they are overrepresented in the 'informal' sector (where they make up 80% of workers)

yet are underrepresented in formal sector jobs.¹³ Despite contributing over half of the GDP of the sub-Saharan region, women's significant productive contributions, such as being the majority food producers on the continent, are often statistically invisible. Women make up the bulk of the workforce in low-wage sectors such as domestic work, and global supply chains including the garment industry, the horticultural sector, and in plantation agriculture.

APPROACHES TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT THAT FOCUS PRIMARILY ON ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION WITHOUT CHALLENGING STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES AROUND DECISION-MAKING AT THE MACRO-LEVEL WILL GENERATE NO SIGNIFICANT CHANGE BEYOND INCREASED WORK BURDENS AND GREATER ECONOMIC PRECARIETY FOR WOMEN.

Women are also often victims of rights violations including sexual harassment and rape, unpaid or no maternity leave, poor pay, long working hours with no overtime pay, and lack of social security and employment benefits. For example, in Uganda, a man who holds the same job as a woman earns 88% on average more than her for the same work.¹⁴ Violations such as these have a gendered impact on women, preventing them from accessing leadership positions and negatively impacting their productivity. In the working world, visible and invisible gender discrimination is evidenced by work often segregated according to gender, with higher paying jobs reserved for men.

Economic shocks, whether caused by war, major demographic shifts, or commodity price changes, are always absorbed disproportionately by the most vulnerable. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed not only how African governments are struggling to prepare support packages for populations that work primarily in unrecognised, unregulated livelihoods (where women are primarily placed), but also how women's care burdens increased in light of isolation and lockdown measures needed to fight the spread of illness. The future of African women's work must

therefore include strong and responsive social protection systems that will support women's needs over their life cycle.¹⁵

Approaches to women's economic empowerment that focus primarily on economic participation without challenging structural inequalities around decision-making at the macro-level will generate no significant change beyond increased work burdens and greater economic precarity for women. Women need decent, dignified work, and economically just recognition and returns for their work. This includes fair pay, protection from workplace violence, income security and other wider social safety nets, such as free childcare. Without significant strategic investment in the informal sector, women will remain perpetually on the periphery.

As the labour market changes, it is vital to pay close attention to potential impacts on women. For instance, the fourth industrial revolution in Africa is underway, and automation, the internet, and artificial intelligence among other dynamics are already starting to change the nature of work and future jobs with significant gendered implications. Although women continue to use mobile and smartphones at a lower rate than men, there are projections of a 134% growth in subscriptions between 2015 and 2030.¹⁶

Aside from the gender disparities that already exist in the digital divide, our technological moment brings to the fore a crucial question about responses to the growing shareholder power of the gig economy, even as it potentially reinforces the social relations that exploit women's labour through precarity.¹⁷ Finding ways for women to benefit from the digital economy are therefore crucial. Harnessing women's collective power around economic rights is one way, because while digital work platforms pose a risk of formalised exploitation, they can also provide opportunities for structural change if women themselves are able to collectively control the technology, which currently is not automatically guaranteed.

***THE STRIPPING AWAY OF PUBLIC SERVICES
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AND THEIR LOAD INCREASES.***

Debt, privatisation, and reparations

Not a day goes by without us hearing a story of debt on the African continent. This year, Ghana signed its 17th programme with the IMF while Zambia has had 14 programmes of its own. Ha-Joon Chang likens it to going to a doctor 17 times for the same problem and the doctor giving you the wrong treatment all 17 times. Debt is a story of austerity, one of drastic cuts in public spending to consolidate budgets and services that are most needed by women. In its place are private solutions to very public problems, locking services behind user fees that many women, who tend to have lower purchasing power, and others at the margins of society are unable to afford. The stripping away of public services doesn't mean that these needs disappear, nor the activities that alleviate them – women continue to subsidise the state through care work and their load increases.

During Africa's 'lost decades', structural adjustment programmes impacted women and girls in specific ways. Fadekemi Abiru offers a comprehensive reflection: a move towards the commoditisation and commercialisation of agriculture pushed women further down the rural hierarchy, whilst the export drive led to increased work burdens on them without any redress for their unpaid care. Cuts to state education exacerbated gender biases within state provisions as patriarchal norms were revived to further marginalise girls' access to education. Progressive currency devaluations also affected health and education sectors the most and given that they were the largest employers of women, budget cuts led to a huge reduction in women's formal avenues for wage earning.¹⁸

Economist Busi Sibeko argues that a feminist reading of Africa's indebtedness requires taking into account how debt has led to policy externalisation, characterised by neoliberal policies which have undermined states' ability to provide the basic goods and services needed to reproduce our societies. The current debt architecture is rooted in a global economic extractive order that is racist, sexist, and colonial in nature. It is not designed to build, but instead designed to extract and continually feed a system that has always needed subsidy. That subsidy has always come from the Global South – it has come from Africa, from our resources and from our labour.

African women's bodies continue to carry a lot of this burden – from African countries' external debt burden right through to household debt. This link between external debt and household debt is routinely ignored and, in its place, jargon and seemingly complex reasoning is used to suggest that these are not 'women's issues.' African feminists continue to ask who should be in these conversations on debt and what vocabulary should be used? It is a form of resistance to bring attention to this link and cast light on the violence the system places on Africa, its citizens, and especially women.

Underpinning feminist economics is a call for reparations and a comprehensive articulation of what reparations mean. Reparations, not just in repayment of money for all the harm caused, but an overhaul of a system that will continue to violently extract even if we were to be paid back. The reparative justice movement puts forth the idea that those who caused and continue to cause harm should not determine the remedy.

Practically, reparation is performed daily through the debt justice and tax justice movements. They prompt discussions on the need to expand the function of taxes to include reparative potential by recognising historical harms done to formerly colonised nations. Another movement demand is unconditional debt cancellation for economies crippled by debt repayments to international financial institutions and forced austerity measures.

Part of this crucial reparative work also lies in decolonisation – going back to understanding and historicising neoliberalism. We cannot undo colonialism without a clear understanding of coloniality, how it continues to reinvent itself and thrive, partly by dominating the global economic governance system and undermining indigenous ways of knowing, elevating a specific type of knowing over praxis of our own.

A conclusion by way of radical hope

As argued by sociologist Patricia McFadden, it is increasingly important for African feminists to know and resist when gender is being used as a neoliberal ‘tool to reinvent the status quo.’⁹ Within this space of struggle, the relationship between Africa’s macroeconomic policy trajectories and African women’s feminist futures must be fought for, unpacked, and analysed, never forgetting that the impact of macro-level economic decisions is experienced differently by different groups of women. With feminist activists increasingly undertaking positions on economic issues, the call to place economic justice at the heart of our economies has never needed greater support. The voices of African women and girls, whose identities and communities are already marginalised and disenfranchised by the current global economic order, continue to be impacted even more by policy choices that exclude or ignore them.

About the authors

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Endnotes

- 1 The feminist economist Stephanie Seguino coined the term 'macro-level economic decisions' to encompass macro-level policies beyond the traditionally narrower definition of macroeconomics. In our use of 'macro-level policy' here, we mean economic development efforts broad enough to have important aggregate or economywide distributional and welfare implications such as taxation, transfers including social protection, public spending, and infrastructure including childcare.
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- 15 Crystal Dicks and Prakashnee Govender, *Labour and Social Justice Series: Feminist Visions of the Future of Work: Africa* (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, 2019), <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/15796.pdf>.
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Interventions is a collaboration between Inkani Books, Pan Africa Today, Dilemmas of Humanity, and Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research.