IS MARXIST THEORY OF FEMINISM RELEVANT TODAY? A NEW (OLD?) PERSPECTIVE ON GENDER IN THE 21st CENTURY DIGITAL ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

The main thesis of this paper is that a more critical look at gender, once taboo, can now reveal not only an inherent class and economic power differential, but also the deepening divide between the global north and global south. In fact, the biggest gender wage gaps according to many studies is actually between white women and black and native women of global north, and even a greater gap between women in the global north and women in the global south. This is because, as I attempt to show that there is an economic structure of continuing dependency on worldwide scale, women from the global south are increasingly subjected to an international division of labour which some Marxist feminists have called apartheid on a global scale. It provides an alternative understanding of gender and highlights the economic forces that are deepening this global divide. It argues that colonialism of global south and capitalism of global north have not really ended but in fact continues to unnoticeably and unintentionally weaponize gender to conceal the current economic malaise of developing countries and this can be seen in the new era of digital revolution. This argument is an attempt to explore this new perspective and I hope insights will be gained as a result of this exploration.

INTRODUCTION

Digitalization has redefined the economy with the introduction of the tools of ICTs with the regular, mundane economic activities across the globe. The world is reduced to a size of one small town, and has shaped the identities of the economic agents in it. And gender is one factor among them. It looks like we are progressing towards gender equality with the new status-quo provided by digitalization, but still, there is a large portion of women who still struggle to access just the basic level of technology. If the progress is true, then who actually

is progressing? The answer is evident, the women who are already in a privileged position to start with, that is, educated, urban western women of advanced countries. It is not just about the divide between the two genders which is increasing, but the differences between the women, the ones belonging to advanced nations and the others who are not even considered as independent to begin with. This paper argues that it's not the social variables like gender biases, stereotypes which are at play to be sure, but an unaddressed and totally neglected economic rationale that can increasingly cheapen the wages of vast majority of poor women in the global south.

Let's take a look on what the literature has to say about this issue.

THE CONFLICTING VIEWS AND THE LITERATURE

There is this mainstream neoclassical (neoliberal) literature (based on most economic textbooks) which claims that ICTs have indeed helped and could be used as a powerful instrument to empower women. Like in the discussion paper written by Wajcman, Young and Fitzmaurice The Digital Revolution: Implication for Gender Equality and Women's Rights 25 years after Beijing (2020), it explores the role of digital revolution in affecting the roles of women in the economy. They trace back its implications in the areas of education, work and social and welfare services. It was discovered that the lack of digital skills in women has led to the encoding of gender biases in the technology. The role of educational technologies has been emphasized and there is a strong association of male with the fields which are related to technology, like STEM. Women in AI workforce in various domains range from 10 to 15% of total workforce, indicating the existence of strong lopsided workforce. There are risks and challenges to be addressed when it comes to women working in the digital economy. The paper provides lastly with many policy recommendations like gender analysis, ethical frameworks for auditing, monitory and governance of AI technologies, education and training and so on. But it neglects the growing divide between women in the global south and women in the global north. My point is, there may be an economic basis for why women in the first place do not have the necessary technological skills in order to join the fast-improving digital economy.

The article written by Sarabia and Morell (2021), studies the gender approaches in digital economy with a systematic literature review. It has analysed policy papers and scientific works across social sciences from the year 1995 to 2020. It has given three main gender approaches to the digital economy feminist theory and ICT approach, the feminist political economy approach and the mainstream economic analysis and women's participation and labour in the digital economy. It found out that the study of gender and digital economy are analysed mostly from the mainstream perspective which mostly non critical and androcentric. There is more focus on differences in men and women but not between women. It also found that at the greater extent, the gendered structure of the economy and the role of the gendered economics dynamics play a powerful role in the process of capital accumulation and both capitalism and patriarchy where responsible for women's oppression. It emphasized the need of analysis of the other areas which have not been looked upon closely like digital business models and the platform economy, gender plans specific to the digital sphere. This important

piece links gender to both the process of capital accumulation and capitalism but does not specifically seem to link it to primitive accumulation, that is, accumulation that goes outside the normal cycles of savings and investments, but based on expropriation, theft, plunder, land grabbing, forced structural adjustment policies and so forth.

We can never understand about an issue without understanding the progress on it. If we look at the OECD websites on Gender Equality and Digital Transformation, we can observe the disparities between men and women are widened because of the differences in the appropriate ICT skills. According to their statistics, in OECD countries men in ICT is 3 to 8 times more than women. Annually there is only 1% increase of women as ICT specialists globally. It emphasized on the right mix of skills is needed to empower women. It highlights the ingrained gender stereotypes and biases to access of ICTs and gender misappropriation of campaigns against women. Women need to participate more in AI research and development, the numbers are increasing but the progress is slow. There is a need to find out suitable ways to combine motherhood and their professional career.

With the new challenges faced by global digital economy' women, UNCTAD provided with some solutions. In its article to how to unlock women's potential in digital economy, it first studies the features of this new economy. Like the low barriers to entry, access to customers all around the world, flexibility in work and location etc. There comes up a pattern of having access to technology, possessing relevant skills, even if it's as little as having minimum digital literacy is the key to help women succeed in these new domains. There are several initiatives taken up like E- Trade for women by UNCTAD, ITU, ETF joint EQUAL project of Talking Tech series for LDCs which are helping women across the globe to excel in the in new status quo of the world.

According to the blog of digital frontier institute (2024), it shows us that the gender gap can be addressed easily with digital initiatives as digital economy has no physical constraints or predefined traditional gender roles. The wide gap between men and women signifies the structural disparities, cultural norms and discriminatory practices which have led to this cause. It also bought up the need of digital education, access to those technologies, and to support women entrepreneurs with ensuring digital safety and security while operating in this new system. The need of more women in decision making areas is must for the creation of digital welfare state.

But the above studies point us to some important problems like if the initiatives have been taken up, if we know the cause and even the remedy, then why the progress has been so minimal at all?

There may be a cause which is not entirely social, cultural factors but economic in nature. It can be viewed back to Marxist view of feminism and that very large literature but needs to be updated and more internationalized given the current world economy.

Yet another paper written by Khosravi Shakib (2010) argue that fragmenting the identities is not a cause to be celebrated but it's an effect of oppressive structures that must be analysed within the historical, political and economic context. The common postmodern view of gender they argue does not signify any new form of production or social organization. It studies the modern history of feminist premise and divides it into three phases, liberal, Marxism and radical post modernism. In the second wave, feminists recognized that patriarchy had a material base which had led to the interdependence and solidarity amongst the men to dominate the women. The radical feminists were concerned with the differences between men and women were exclusively about the differences between power and authority. It analysed different feminist perspectives and concluded that the more we create differences, diversity, and pluralism, there is an inverse proportion between this self-proclaimed liberal jargon, homogenization and actual improvement of women. Feminism has become a commercial aesthetic and capitalism and anarchy have some connections with it.

In the paper written by Bhandari (2010), questions the flaws of the theory surrounding gender studies and social capital. The paper takes the example of Nepal and argues the fact that the post modernization might embody the neoliberal globalized ideology, but it isn't as critical as it claims to be towards the processes of imperialism, increasing capitalism and neocolonialism. Post modernism is mostly "euro-centric" in nature by fact, and delinking this would help us to understand the true nature of the problem. Cognitions cannot be treated equally, and is different from equality between individuals but yet the post modernism confuses it and mixes the two distinct thoughts only to bolster their façade of tolerance. This may be called as the new spirit of capitalism, and it does the total opposite of what it conveys. In this view, western feminism flourishes on the grave of views of women of developing nations, where they view the poor women's perspectives as backward, inferior, unliberated, brought up in oppressive regimes. They deny them with freedom of thought, which leads them to the western ideology of feminism. Their liberation is based upon the denial of other women's liberation. This shows the hegemony of western feminism, and how it is forced universally on third world women as well in a larger global context of unequal exchange, trade and finance.

Another very interesting paper along these lines written by Bhandari and Shreshta (2010) exposes how the common view of gender is really under the ideology of postmodernism which has become the new form of western imperialism. They do this by analysing a leading feminist book of Nepal written by Katherine Neilson Rankin, The Cultural Politics of Markets: Economic and Social Change in Nepal, (2004). Where the author states the role of planning in creation of space for feminist ideology where women would feel empowered and liberated is must, the paper argues that she fails to look that it is not what actual Nepal women need. For a western outsider, it is easy to conclude that they have a long way to achieve gender equality, without being a part of their complex society. Western feminists like Rankin tell us to dismantle the space of neoliberal ideology (along with gender and caste oppression) to create the space of feminist ideology, space where women are empowered and liberated. But Rankin is silent about the moral, psychological, and physical destruction

caused by the forced foreign aid and how this has made Nepal absolutely impotent and hopelessly economically dependent. Her study lacks the analysis of role of country's changing population dynamics and growth in cultural economy with increased foreign dependency in every realm of life, that is, financially, commercially, economically, politically, even linguistically. To put simply, paper finds that western feminism is like a messianic message to spread the gospel of feminism and by following it, people would be destined to attain freedom from sexism and all social ills will be vanished and will achieve a "Utopia" at last, all because of western intervention. But the question arises, who needs to learn from whom? who holds the torch of empirical authority? The persistent pretension to universalize the values and the subsequent urge to preach these universal virtues to unenlightened natives around the world seems exactly like the same colonial ideology of Western Europe. A more sober theory would work, which overcomes all kinds of social power like class, gender etc which can be implemented without any vested group interests. This paper gives a good example of where United States is yet to elect a woman president, India has already done it in 1966. This example coveys that not all women are in the desperate situation as the "euro-centric" western thinking claims it to be.

It seems like the gender studies make the same exact parallel argument in the neo-classical economics that is we spread the western views of gender throughout the world, it will trickle down and lead to convergence. If we look into nitty-gritty of who has "power" in this digital economy, and if many attempts are being made to bridge this gap, then why isn't there any "convergence" especially between the vast majority of global south and the majority of women in global north?

It's because there is lack of literature on how women are viewed in third world countries, and here's where the grand ship of inclusive digital economy fails.

A LOST CAUSE?

Despite several attempts made by various stakeholders, there exists this persistent division between the women of first world and third world nations when it comes to relevant skills, accessibility, affordability of technology where if there is any progress, it is slow. This infers that apart from the social causes, there are some economic factors as well which play an important role in determining the status of woman in the digitalized economy. The women of third world are segregated which makes them vulnerable compared to the women of advanced nations. This has its history in colonialism and emergence of capitalism, and how women are viewed globally.

Women are classified based on their race, class along with their gender. The western idea of an independent women is thrust upon the women of global south which doesn't take into the account the differences which exist between them. The whole notion around the solutions being proposed even in the digital sphere of the economy is more "euro-centric" than "global-south" centric. Even if studies are made in the developing countries, they aren't sufficient to make up the appropriate literature which could be used as a reference for the global south.

When it comes to the idea of women in the developing and underdeveloped nations, it is complex and involves many sub-layers beneath. Women in the global south are not homogenous and many in the global south are indistinguishable between privileged women in the global north. Many women in the global south are extremely similar to the privileged women of global north. However, in the gender studies, it does not seem to "trickle down". The women who are looked down as women of developing nations are often subjected to stereotypes of being less educated, less skilled and less advanced than that of women residing in developed economies which again creates a subordination between them. Women of global south are indeed less privileged than those of global north generally speaking, whose causes can be traced back not to the colonialization and rise of capitalism of past, but arguably in the present. This is "economics of power" where women of low class of colonies were always treated as labour class, from whom maximum value was extracted, (in Marxian theory it's the surplus value) whereas, the privileged women of the colonialist countries were still gaining ground compared to them. This segregation has been rampant from the era of industrialization, and has only increased till today. The whole argument that women are suffering because of the ingrained gender stereotypes and biases psychology stems from the fact that this wasn't implanted because of the perceived differences between men and women. Men and women are biologically different, and that's accepted. Then from where does this difference emerge? From the economic power and economic power differentials that continue to exist between former colonies and their colonial masters.

During the colonial rule, women of the colonized nations were treated as second class citizen. Most of their work involved as care givers or working in the field, which was inherently a low skilled job. And it is well known by the fact that low skill jobs are low paid, they never got the opportunity to build wealth or have money of their own. Even if the men of colonized nations were poor, the works assigned to them required more skills than that of which women did. This created the gap between men and women of the same nation, and it still exists today. The lack of ownership of assets which gave them no power to take decisions, made them vulnerable to the men, who eventually took the charge. This was one of the consequences of capitalism which wasn't recognized as one of the major causes of this divide, which seems to get lost in the highly intellectual fashionable gender literature.

It seems to me that western feminism emerges as another form of western forms of domination over countries of global south. The whole doctrine revolves around the barriers faced by white women of advances countries which cannot be applied to women of colour across the world, including those millions of women in the global north. This can also be another way of masking the ill-doings of colonialism, providing a remedy of something which is actually a by-product of it. There is a need of more of a neutral way of viewing women, basically considering the women of third world countries as their subjects to uplift them and ultimately bring a change.

This continuing capitalist and colonial approach not only have distorted the economies of the of global south, but also our notions on men and women. There may have inevitably been friction between men and women in the past, but nothing on a global systematic scale where the skills they possess, the financial freedom that they desire has been so significantly silenced and denied at the expense of privileged women gabbing their doors open. In an advanced digital economy, these important and hugely unequal differences between countries simply cannot be ignored.

ANY ANCHOR FOR THIS POTENTIALLY SINKING SHIP?

There is a need to view gender with a new lens, that is, within a global context. Women of global south need to be addressed with special reference to their colonial history, geographical diversity and cultural significance and how this has led to the unequal division of economic power in the same economy. Ignoring the third world women would only widen the gap between them and the women of the first world. When opportunities are presented globally, the women who could access it easily get it whereas others get excluded easily. This would mean that the rich, the one who is already better off, will win at the expense of the one who doesn't even know that such opportunity exists.

We need to recognise the fact that the social differences are fuelled and exaggerated by the economic players, and this has a long history embodied in colonialism and capitalism. It returns back to the argument of "haves" and the "haves not" and only with the destruction of capitalism, an egalitarian society could be restored. That doesn't necessarily mean that we need to wipe off capitalism from the world which is impossible today, but to at least acknowledge that there are larger structural problems that are economic in nature that simply need to be addressed.

Strong policies, active government, good institutions and collective partnerships can yield some prominent results for the gender gap but are not enough. The huge contradictions between global south and global north need to be addressed since the vast majority of the women are fully excluded from any kind of digitalization in their actual life. To make use of the best digitalization is providing us, we need to make sure that we fully understand the context of women in global south. The initiatives, the ideas, concepts on which an independent woman is defined now is based on western lines, which isn't applicable to the rest of the world. There is lack of "trickle down" effects when it comes to gender and its progress. The key here is to redefine and reconceptualize the gender analysis and redefine what it means to be an "independent woman" in a digitalized economy, especially in the context of global south where notions of independence are often equated with individualism and selfishness and destroying social relationships of their families and their communities at large.

Yes, we need more women entrepreneurs, more women working in ICT jobs, more women finding work based on their high skills and more women having economic power over their

life and its activities but it would not be possible as long as women continue to be treated as second class, if not, third class citizen around the world.

CONCLUSION

It seems like to me that the conventional economics that we learn in classes is not really well equipped to handle the bigger gender gap issues and the most important question is for which "women" are we fighting for and is our theory really inclusive beyond the name sake. Because thinking about it and formulating theories based on western modes of an independent women and her barriers to access to the digital economy and its opportunities would mask the fact that most of the divide exists between the women of global north and women of global south which has its history linked with colonialist way of dividing labour and power. The problem appears to be more complex and deeper and this calls for us to think about "women of developing and under developed nations" and the unique set of challenges and barriers are simply not understood with the western brushes. Whether its digital economy or the old primitive economy, it cannot be understood without placing these gender studies in a larger global context with continuing colonial economic relationships that most countries face today. I hope to simply propose this idea and redirect people's attention and consider these deepening divides between the global south and global north and how gender can be properly placed in this context. Even if western feminism claims to deny all kinds of contractions of imperialism and external dependence and benefit the third world countries, it seems like the western feminists prosper in the developing countries by refusing to accept the views of the women of global south. It happens because it is thought that denying any sort of perspectives of these women and viewing them as backward, primitive, inferior, outdated would eventually lead them to the western feminist ideology. But the white women of global north forget to give credits to those indigenous, marginalized, ill-paid Asian, Latino women who serve them. Those women often get denied of their own opportunities to serve their families, their children, their opportunities of love. The experiences of those women are never discussed and I would like to propose a theory of gender that makes these women central subjects and not silenced.

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