

Breadwinners, Boundary Breakers: Third World Women and Alternate Economic Organizations
in the Wake of Capitalism

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Abstract

This paper looks critically at economic discourses around Third World women, considering the economic struggles and successes of several groups of women inside and outside prescribed capitalist systems. Western neo-liberal feminism often places a great deal of weight on women's participation in capitalist systems as a measure of their liberation and equality, but in reality, participation in capitalism looks very different for Third World women than it does for Western women. This essay explores three cases in which the women of a particular Third World region have found power in subverting capitalist structures, and analyzes the discursive power of painting Third World women as being in need of Western imperialist structures for their "liberation."

Capitalism, the economic rock on which the Western world rests, has long been considered a system of freedom, self-determination, and justice. Even for women, who historically “do two-thirds of the world’s work and earn less than one-tenth of its income” (Mohanty 514), capitalism is lauded as being an equalizer, a force that encourages ingenuity and invariably, necessarily rewards hard work, regardless of the gender of the person performing it. Indeed, Western feminist writers like Katherine Kersten have even suggested that “capitalism and the market, with their dynamism, flexibility, and appetite for innovation, are among the most powerful tools that women have in their quest for autonomy” (Kersten 47). Upper class white women such as Kersten tend to attribute their own success primarily to the virtues of capitalism, and purport that those women who fail to gain the economic or social “freedoms” they themselves enjoy, are oppressed only by their exclusion from full participation in the capitalist system. Kersten goes on to claim that “Third World women deprived of the market’s benefits have found little means of escaping the rigid roles that have constrained them for millennia” (Kersten 47), fully attributing the plight of Third World women to their tragic inability to climb the capitalist ladder. But what is the truth about Third World women’s place in the global economy?

Despite the claims of theorists like Kersten, capitalism is not a luxury reserved for the First World. Due to the continent-spanning reach of capitalist powerhouses like the United States, participation in capitalist structures and production is compulsory for people around the world, regardless of the de jure systems of their own countries. Third World peoples, in fact, have been participating in capitalism for nearly as long as the United States has, and yet it has continually failed to have the uplifting effect on the status of women in these countries that theorists like Kersten predict. For many, capitalism is a necessary game to play for survival, and

for as long as it has existed women have played it, more often to their disadvantage than their liberation. In *Dignity and Daily Bread*, Swasti Mitter outlines a number of statistics on the sheer number of women working underground for factories around the world; in 1985, over 17,000 women were estimated to be working in the underground garment industry in Buenos Aires, and in 1980 the underground, non-protected employment rates in Columbia reached as high as 35% (Rowbotham and Mitter 28). Overworked and underpaid, these people, the vast majority of them women, are forced to work in secret to allow their bosses to avoid complying with regulations and paying benefits entitled to workers.

Even “officially” employed Third World people are taken advantage of by capitalist systems that prioritize the convenience and prosperity of the First World, women predominantly being the targets of this economic violence. In 2006, a group of Mexican women filmed a documentary about their experiences working in the *maquiladoras*, or factories, of American companies that have set up shop all along the Mexican border and established themselves as the primary providers of wage labor in the region. The documentary, *Maquilapolis*, shows how these factories target women workers who they consider to be more pliable and desperate for work, underpaying them, refusing to pay severance and benefits, poisoning them with unregulated hygiene conditions, and polluting nearby communities with runoff. This form of capitalism is not a corruption of capitalist ideals, but rather the backbone of the form of capitalism that Westerners enjoy. Women of the Third World have certainly been “deprived of the market’s benefits,” but not for lack of participation in the capitalist market itself.

Despite the rallying cry of capitalist wage earning as the ultimate source of liberation for women, time and time again this has been proved false in the case of Third World women, who are far more likely to be exploited by those who run the systems. However, the failure of

capitalism in uplifting Third World women does not mean that these women are completely alienated from economic success. To combat the capitalism's inability to adequately provide for the health and wellbeing of themselves and their communities, countless groups of Third World women have developed new strategies and alternate economies to subvert and undercut the oppression they face at the hands of this system that is apparently built to liberate them. In the face of overwhelming demonization and anxiety by the imperialist systems they live under, these women created ways to assert their power and establish an economic identity in a world that fears and hates nothing more than their agency. The economic systems built by Third World women are as widely varied and diverse as the women who built them, and we could not hope to address them all in a single essay, so instead I will briefly shine a light on just three groups of women and the strategies they have enacted to survive and thrive in spite of capitalism.

Indigenous American Women

Indigenous peoples have perhaps been impacted more than almost any other group by the violence of capitalist imperialism. Not only have their land and resources been stolen out from under their feet, their culture has undergone centuries of erasure and rewriting. Even today, indigenous cultures and social structures are painted as backward and "savage." Traditional divisions of labor among indigenous communities have been decomplexified in the colonial metanarrative and made out to be repressive to women and economically underdeveloped, in favor of imposing the idea that capitalism will be the panacea for gendered power imbalances and oppression in indigenous communities. And in some ways, this imposed narrative has worked. Indigenous women have become more and more involved in wage labor in recent decades, "more households are headed by women, and in an increasing number of households,

women are the primary breadwinners” (Kuokkanen 225). In many cases, indigenous women have either accepted this narrative as truth or assimilated as a strategy for survival. But once again, capitalism has failed to improve the social status and security of these women. In her essay “‘This Fierce Love’: Gender, Women, and Art Making,” Sherry Farrell Racette explains how tribal elders had increasingly “witnessed a loss of female prestige as their communities shifted from traditional communal economies to capitalism” (Racette 30). By enforcing Western standards of women as unpaid, unthanked, invisible childbearers and childrearers, women have been forced away from the economic activities like farming, meat preparation, and resource management and distribution that gave them power in traditional indigenous economies.

It is important to note that indigenous communities and economies are not homogenous, and thus it would be unwise to make blanket statements about the nature of each individual indigenous nation’s pre- and post-colonial economic systems, but a wealth of research has turned up patterns across nations that cannot be ignored. Both Racette and Rauna Kuokkanen, in her essay “Indigenous Economies, Theories of Subsistence, and Women,” characterize the move from land-based subsistence economies traditional to native communities to commodity-based capitalism as “a war against women and their economic, political, and social autonomy in society” (Kuokkanen 223). Because traditional subsistence economies were frequently the domain of women in non-Western and Third World nations, the introduction of capitalism to these communities has markedly “resulted in a subsequent diminishment of women’s previously respected roles, coupled with increased vulnerability” (Racette 33). Indigenous women still worked as much as they always had prior to the introduction of capitalism, but the biggest difference that it brought to their lives and their economic status was a distinct financial and

social devaluation of the necessary labor of providing and creating that they had always performed.

So it is no surprise, perhaps, that in recent years, women have been at the forefront of movements in indigenous communities to transition from capitalism, which has left reservations and native lands ravaged by poverty, toward the traditional economies that saw their nations thriving and their mothers and grandmothers largely empowered in their communities. For Third World women across the globe, a return to “subsistence represents not only personal autonomy and agency and economic self-sufficiency but also a means of resisting the global capitalist economy and its patriarchal, colonial control over women, means of production, and the land” (Kuokkanen 228). Many women have even found ways to twist capitalist structures into serving community based economic models, holding traditional giveaways and ceremonies that spread resources throughout the community, giving away bank loans, money, and store bought goods the way their communities once shared food and homemade goods (Kuokkanen 229).

Capitalism has become a site of empowerment for indigenous women through its subversion. From the failures of capitalism, many indigenous women have found a space to reassert their autonomy and build something new, pulled from their cultural roots, that suits the needs of their communities. In many cases, the efforts of these women have led to the increased independence of their communities as a whole by “run[ning] counter to the government programs intended to increase the dependence on capitalist production” (Kuokkanen 229). By reducing their communities’ reliance on capitalism and producing new economic strategies that restore value to the previously invisible but perpetually necessary work of women, indigenous women have asserted their power and autonomy both over colonial capitalist structures and in their communities.

Tanzanian Women

In Tanzania, women have made especially tangible strides in creating economic networks to fill in the gaps of failing capitalism. In the 1970s, Tanzania's economy plummeted as a result of declining export values. Prices of commodities like oil and cash crops dipped significantly and the country found itself deep in an economic crisis, the salaries of Tanzanian wage workers declining by 83 percent in a period of fourteen years (Rowbotham and Mitter 140-142). It was this collapse of profitability and economic sustainability under capitalism that opened the door for women to build an economic identity for themselves.

As the ability of mostly male wage workers to provide for a household all but disappeared, "the burden fell largely on women to sustain the household through informal small businesses" (Rowbotham and Mitter 142-143). These small businesses or "projects" formed the backbone of this survival economy in the wake of economic collapse, the income from these independent, often unofficial or informal business ventures forming the majority of household income. It was only as capitalist economic structures focused on cash production rather than community and sustainability began to collapse that Tanzanian women were able to assert their economic authority and autonomy, "thus, women, who in the past had contributed relatively little to the urban household income, were now critical to the very survival of the household" (Rowbotham and Mitter 143). Rather than seeing their status increase through the economic "opportunities" of capitalism, Tanzanian women thrived most in its decline.

But the true economic success of Tanzanian women lies not simply in taking advantage of a crumbling system, but in building new structures that benefit both their own status and the economic health of their communities. Structures such as rotating savings societies, called *upato*,

in which groups of women pooled extra earnings to be dipped into in the future by group members in need, and women's co-operatives exploded in popularity and prevalence. Systems that allowed women to both support their households and support one another's projects and wellbeing were prioritized over systems that gained the most capital for the sake of gaining capital. Women who worked on economic projects together frequently formed almost familial kinships, their networks of support transcending economic and social boundaries into a new type of structure that prioritizes support over perpetual growth.

Tellingly, there is little research on the contemporary economic status and structures of women in Tanzania save for Aili Mari Tripp's chapter in *Dignity and Daily Bread*. Similarly to responses to the economic reorganizing of indigenous women, the true extent of Tanzanian women's contributions to the economy is swept under the rug. Structures like those that Tanzanian women have built represent a clear and present danger to the continuing functionality of global capitalism. Their success flies in the face of capitalist narratives of Third World disempowerment through economic and social backwardness, showing bold facedly the inaccuracy of claims that Third World women's oppression is rooted in the failure of their communities to adequately adopt capitalism. The organizing of Third World women, again, seems to be both strongly effective in subverting capitalist oppression and a completely invisibilized sector of labor. This invisibilization, more than anything, indicates a space that feminists and anti-capitalist theorists could benefit greatly from illuminating.

Iranian Women

Like indigenous communities, Muslim societies have also been painted as repressive, sexist, and backwards, America's many colonialist exploits in the Middle East framed as

necessary to social and economic liberation in the otherwise uncivilized region. Middle Eastern Muslim women, however, have been at the forefront of a number of economic reorganization efforts that have been largely rendered invisible by pervasive Western narratives of the helplessness of Muslim women. But in reality, Muslim women have been constructing alternate economic structures and filling in the gaps left behind by capitalism for years, shouldering burdens that capitalism promised the lift from them for the good of their communities.

Just one way that women have paved the way for alternate economic systems in Iran is through the solidarity economy. The solidarity or social economy involves the production of goods and services outside the public and private sector markets, “delivering a means for survival to the poor and effectively fills the gap between what should be delivered by the other sectors” (Bahramitash 364). This economy of social support to provide for those who have found themselves at the bottom of the capitalist ladder has been kept alive primarily by low-income Muslim women through religious programs and independent organizing. Like women in Tanzania, women in Iran developed rotating savings societies to care for members in need, and on the basis of their religion, painted so often by the west as repressive and controlling to women, created female dominated organizations focused on “mutual help, poverty relief, and other ways of community care” (Bahramitash 365). Low-income Islamic women, those least served by the capitalist system, effectively became community care providers, building up both support networks and their own social and economic capital through the project of economically supporting others.

But this social organizing of Iranian women should not be seen as a burst of independence against their own “oppressive” cultures. In reality, to contemporary Middle Eastern women, “gender equality was a way to confront the colonial culture effectively” (Lobban 12).

Expressions of economic power among Iranian women is resistance against colonial capitalism that seeks to keep them isolated, impoverished, and desperate for work, without any external safety nets, not against their own cultures. Though across the Middle East, women's "creative responses to complex and varied circumstances" (Lobban 38) have manifested in countless different ways between urban and rural life, between different cultures and countries and interpretations of Islam, the social organizing of Iranian women to undercut the suffering and alienation that comes along with capitalism can be seen as an example of women's ingenuity in constructing economic systems that both allow for their own networking and social advancement and function in the interests of their communities.

Third World Women and Discourses of Liberation

Women have always been vital to the survival of any economy, through wage labor, informal labor, and through sheer exploitation by capitalist systems. Women have always worked, contrary to the rallying cries of First World white feminists, but rather than finding success and independence through capitalism, it seems that time and time again, the economic successes of women seem tied to their subversion of capitalist systems. Faced with the basic need for survival and the failure of capitalism to provide for their communities, Third World women have led the charge in the construction of alternate economies.

But in spite of their many successes, these alternate economies are frequently demonized, downplayed, even made invisible by Western narratives. Across the world, informal economies, in which so many women found their agency and strength as providers and key economic players, "was therefore portrayed as a residue from an earlier mode of production and its persistence a sign of 'underdevelopment,' 'traditionalism' and 'backwardness,' while the

formal economy was depicted as representing ‘development,’ ‘modernity,’ ‘progress’ and ‘advancement’” (Williams 348). This anxiety about spheres in which women retain power are a common function of imperial agendas. Anne McClintock, in her book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, shows how the colonized, the feminine, and chaos are often conflated in imperial narratives, the need to tame colonized lands and peoples masking “acute paranoia, and a profound, if not pathological, sense of male anxiety and boundary loss” (McClintock 24). This anxiety is reflected again and again through imperial narratives about alternate economic systems, particularly those led by women. The subversion of capitalist systems represents a disruption of the empire, a certain boundary loss, as McClintock puts it, over the domain of the capitalist control over women’s labor and capital, masquerading as their liberation.

The connections that McClintock draws between shows of strength in Third World women and this colonial, psychosexual fear of boundary loss is echoed by Racette, who explains “the fact that women became a focused target of campaigns of control and denigration is perhaps our greatest evidence for considering women’s critical importance in constructing strong and resistant societies” (34). Despite the subservient status of women in the colonial psychology, women have always served as “the boundary markers of imperialism” (McClintock 34), and to dominate them is to dominate a land, its resources, and its people. Third World women’s power, therefore, “was associated with communalism and therefore primitivism” (Racette 28), with “primitivism,” femininity, and colonized lands then all coming to signify disorder and chaos. Colonizers wished to ravish the land, and its women by extension, but also harbored a profound fear of the power of “engulfment” that both possessed. By exerting power over colonized women, by subjugating them and making them powerless,

the powers of imperialism might for some time rest easy, but when Third World women take control over the bedrock of imperialism that is capitalism, all those anxieties of engulfment and boundary loss at the root of imperialism itself are realized.

Women in communities most affected by capitalist exploitation have enjoyed their greatest economic success in creating new economic structures that subvert it. The successes of these women, however, have been largely erased, elided out of existence by a deep seated colonial fear of the power and strength of Third World women. Though women had been working long before capitalism, their increased presence in documentable wage labor was seen as “feminist progress” in the Third World, despite the lack of increased economic independence and upward mobility among these women. Their independence, it seems, increasingly comes from reorganizing economic structures away from capitalism and toward new systems that suit the needs of their communities. Chandra Mohanty writes that “by paying attention to and theorizing the experiences of these communities of women and girls...we demystify capitalism as a system of debilitating sexism and racism and envision anticapitalist resistance” (514). Third World women have been constructed for centuries in the Western gaze to be helpless within their societies, in need of imperialist liberation, but both socially and economically, their greatest liberation has been from the oppressive structures of their Western capitalist “liberators.”

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