

Decolonising Feminist Scholarship: The Intersection Of Gender, Culture, And Politics
In The Global South

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Abstract

Global feminist studies continue to bear the imprint of Western epistemologies that universalise the experiences of women, and, in doing so, often erase the histories, struggles, and resistances of the Global South. This **research paper** adopts a comparative and analytical approach to examine how feminist movements in the Global South challenge and reframe Western feminist models. It situates women's socio-political realities within the interlinked structures of patriarchy, colonialism, and neoliberal globalisation, aiming to contribute to the broader academic discourse on decolonial feminist theory.

Global feminist reflections have been dominated by Western understandings that often erase and homogenise women's diverse experiences, especially in the intersectional contexts of Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and the Middle East. The evidence is analysed in four thematic areas-neoliberal globalisation and women's labour, Indigenous feminist movements, intersections of race/class/gender. Women's political mobilisation and peacebuilding-showing how local feminist movements decolonialize feminist studies and demonstrate contextually-informed, culturally-embedded pathways for gender justice.

Utilising case studies like the garment industry in Bangladesh and Mexico, Indigenous land rights movements in Ecuador and Bolivia, Dalit feminism in India, and the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. The paper highlights various approaches to collectively resist injustice

from grassroots organising, through transnational solidarity networks and intersectional advocacy.

These movements not only contest the structural inequities sustained by global economic and political systems but also generate new frameworks that nurture collective well-being. Cultural preservation, and resilience in the face of state repression and patriarchal backlash. The analysis offers possibilities for the transformative. Effects thereby decolonising feminist scholarship and highlighting the necessity for global feminist scholarship for the Global South to be included in the global feminist canon-providing pathways, for feminist theorising and practice that are more reflexively inclusive and representative.

Keywords: *Decolonising Feminism, Global South Feminist Movements, Intersectionality, Postcolonial Feminist Theory, Neoliberal Globalisation, Indigenous Feminism, Gender, Race, and Class, Political Mobilisation, Peacebuilding, Transnational Feminism*

Introduction

Although feminist scholarship engages with global contexts, much of its literature and theoretical grounding has been shaped by Western intellectual traditions. These frameworks often universalise women’s experiences through Eurocentric lenses, thereby marginalising alternative knowledge systems and local feminist thought emerging from the Global South.

It is contradictory, in the sense of women's realities in the Global South, the momentous things they face and must overcome in battling patriarchy. To be able to have scholars in the Global South and Global North universality see women's experience. Women's struggles exist in a world of political and historical realities within a web of complexities and interconnections of patriarchy, colonialism, and various aspects of modern-day neoliberal globalisation.

Consequently, feminist movements are taking root across the Global South-in regions such as Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and the Middle East. These movements resist systemic oppression through approaches that move beyond overarching or universal theories. Instead, they develop context-specific frameworks of women’s struggle for gender justice, grounded in historical, cultural, and economic realities.

Foundational critiques of universalist feminist models are offered by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) in *Under Western Eyes*, who argues that Western feminist discourse often constructs “Third World women” as a singular, homogeneous group. Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1988) seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* warns against the epistemic violence inherent in speaking for the subaltern without recognising her historical and cultural specificities. Other frameworks, such as Patricia Hill Collins’ (2000) concept of the *matrix of domination* and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) theory of *intersectionality*, further reveal how multiple systems of oppression-race, class, gender-operate simultaneously to structure women’s lived experiences. (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988; Hill Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989)

Such critical frameworks offer a framework for how feminist movements from the Global South, push back against hegemonic framings of discourses about women's empowerment that portray a monolithic aspiration of equality.

This paper examines four thematic areas to analyse this resistance: first; the effects of neoliberal globalisation on women's work, second; Indigenous feminist movements focusing on cultural survival and collective wellness, third; the connections between race, class and gender in shaping women's contests, fourth; political mobilisation peacebuilding in situations of conflict, post-conflict contexts.

Methodologically, this paper adopts a comparative, qualitative approach, drawing on secondary literature, NGO reports, and regional case studies from Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and the Middle East. Using case studies and following a comparative and qualitative approach, this study attempts to develop understandings of strategies and epistemologies from the Global South, which serve to both question Western feminist paradigms and contribute to transnational feminist interests. It asks: *How do local feminist movements in the Global South challenge Western feminist paradigms and address the intersection of patriarchy, colonial legacies, and neoliberal globalisation in women’s socio-political experiences?*

Theoretical and Contextual Framework

Even though feminist scholarship has been global, it has been fashioned around Western paradigms that do not reflect the socio-political conditions of women in the Global South. These paradigms often erase the multidimensional realities of colonial legacies, patriarchy, and neoliberal globalisation that shape women's everyday experiences in the Global South (Mohanty, 1988; Rege, 1998). Recent feminist movements within these regions have sought to challenge the use of these Western frameworks. To reach a more inclusive feminist discourse based on the heterogeneity of women's experiences across cultural, political, and economic contexts.

This paper is an attempt to explore how feminist movements in the Global South decolonise feminist scholarship about the interlocking elements of gender, culture, and politics. It will look at four key topics: the effects of neoliberal globalisation on women's labour, indigenous feminist movements, intersections in race, class, and gender, the role of women in political mobilisation, peacebuilding. Case studies from Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and the Middle East will be used to show how local feminist movements contest the structures of Western feminism.

Neoliberal Globalization and Women's Labor

Neoliberal globalisation has fundamentally reshaped women's labour elsewhere in the world. Export-oriented industries and pressures for liberalisation of the economy have opened up new fields of employment for women in Global South. Often with increased levels of exploitation, job insecurity, and working conditions that are deteriorating fast. The feminisation of labour in areas such as textiles, electronics, and agriculture has resulted in a feminised workforce entering the labour market. These jobs are typically characterised by **low wages, inadequate social protection, and heightened vulnerability to market fluctuations**, with women comprising a significant proportion of this precarious workforce. Empirical evidence from the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2019) indicates that export-oriented industries in textiles, electronics, and agriculture across the Global South disproportionately employ women under exploitative conditions of flexible, insecure labour (Edmonds, Cunha, Kemp, & Lindström, 2019; Fernandez-Kelly, 1984).

The garment and maquiladora industries in Bangladesh and Mexico exemplify the precarious labour conditions fostered by neoliberal policies. Though these sectors generate employment, they rely on women’s cheap, compliant labour to sustain profit margins. Such exploitation reproduces gender hierarchies and cements women’s peripheral position in the global economy (Fernandez-Kelly, 1984; Rothstein, 1984).

Though such industries have created opportunities for wage labour for women, these industries exploit women as cheaper, docile labour due to the high degree of desire these industries create among women to work at low wages. Labour conditions such as these perpetuate and enhance existing gender hierarchies and further mortgage women in the periphery of the global economy. (Fernandez-Kelly, 1984)

Feminist movements from the Global South have critiqued neoliberal globalisation as creating a new international order, which does not cater to the specific rights and needs of women workers. In South Asia, feminist organisations such as the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India and the Bangladesh National Garment Workers Federation have campaigned for fair wages, maternity leave, and the right to unionise. Their advocacy links gender justice with labour reform, illustrating how regional feminist politics confront neoliberal exploitation through collective mobilisation (UN Women, 2022). These movements view the global feminist discourse of women’s labour as needing to be informed by the specific contexts in which women live and survive in the Global South, highlighting economic disadvantage and patriarchal context.

Indigenous Feminist Movements

Indigenous feminist movements offer an important framework for exploring the intersections of colonial tensions, culture, and gender in the Global South. Indigenous feminist movements also continue to emphasise the reclamation of indigenous knowledges, values and practices within their work towards equality for women. Indigenous feminist movements in Latin America and Africa differ markedly from Western feminism’s emphasis on individual autonomy. **Indigenous feminism** situates gender equality within community wellbeing, land rights, and ecological justice. For instance, the *Mujeres Indígenas por la Conservación* in Peru

and *African Indigenous Women's Organisation* in Kenya articulate feminism through collective survival and spiritual relationships with land (Radcliffe, 2015).

Indigenous women's activism in Latin America is paving the way for land rights and human rights regarding the environment. For example, In Ecuador and Bolivia, indigenous women have mobilised against multinational corporations exploiting natural resources. Movements such as the *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE)* Women's Council and *Bartolina Sisa Federation* in Bolivia frame their activism as both feminist and anti-colonial, challenging extractivist capitalism and defending land sovereignty (Rousseau, 2018). Such a trend talks about the differences in the popularity of feminism in the West, where gender is the centre of the movement, to the intersectional approach identified by indigenous movements that take into account colonial legacies that contort their lives even today.

Indigenous feminists critique the imposition of Western ideals-particularly liberal notions of individualism and market-oriented empowerment-which disregard communal and ecological values central to their worldviews. This epistemic hegemony reinforces colonial hierarchies of knowledge, positioning Western feminism as universal while marginalising indigenous epistemologies (Radcliffe, 2015; Spivak, 1988). There are women across the Global South who criticise Western feminism's ideas about gender equality, which emphasises individualism and market-driven solutions. Rather, they articulate a feminism that aims at trying to make the concerns of indigenous worldviews, such as community, reciprocal relationships, and the protection of the land and natural resources, become centrepieces of their fight for justice, a gendered battle. (Radcliffe, 2015)

Race, Class, and Gender Intersections

Western feminist theory has historically under-addressed the intersections of race, class, and gender that shape oppression in the Global South. Scholars such as Crenshaw (1989) and Hill Collins (2000) demonstrate that women's experiences cannot be understood in isolation from these structural dimensions. In the Global South, intersectionality reveals how colonialism and economic marginalisation intensify gendered inequalities (Rege, 1998).

In South Africa, the point of intersection for race, class, and gender has formed the core of feminist organising since the apartheid regime. These racist policies and patriarchal systems, Black women are doubly marginalised. In South Africa, feminist scholars argue that racial segregation and class inequality compound women’s vulnerability. Pumla Dineo Gqola (2007) links gender-based violence to the “cult of femininity” and violent masculinities embedded in post-apartheid society, showing how intersecting structures of race, class, and gender restrict access to education, healthcare, and work for Black women. Feminists have demanded new feminist scholarship that is fair and attends to the needs of women facing multiple layers of marginalisation.

Thinking about the feminist movement in India, we can see that it has been one of the movements that has countered hegemonic discourses that downplay the intersections of caste, class and gender. Especially for Dalit women, positioned at the bottom of India's socially constructed hierarchical order, discrimination against them does not only come from men, it also comes from women who are from the upper caste. For example, Dalit feminists have criticised dominant Indian feminist movements for privileging some particular struggles that engage in matters related to women, in this case, in lower castes. Instead, they have been in support of an intersectional approach, a deconstruction of multiple axes of oppression defining women's lives in India. (Gqola, How the ‘cult of femininity’ and violent masculinities support endemic gender based violence in contemporary South Africa, 2007)

Political Mobilisation by Women and Peace-Building

The women in the Global South have given much vigour to political mobilisation and efforts towards peacebuilding, challenging the Western feminist assumptions of the role of women in conflict as well as post-conflict societies. Women's organisations on grassroots and other levels became a key feature in most parts of the Global South for movements for political change, from activism to leadership in negotiations for peace. (Tripp, 2015)

African women have been integral to both, but in several countries, notably Rwanda and Liberia, women have gone even further in peace-building work, negotiating settlements and

rebuilding communities. Of the various instances of women's mobilisation in the Global South demanding political change and peace, perhaps the most prominent is the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement, led by Leymah Gbowee. Many groups like it, contest those Palestinian feminist critiques of the West that present women's roles in conflict zones as passive and marginal. To show that women are engaged actors and leaders in political processes of all kinds. Women's participation in the Arab Spring-particularly in Tunisia's *Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates* and Egypt's *Women and Memory Forum*-illustrates their central role in demanding democratic reform. Similar mobilisation in Tanzania and Palestine highlights that women were not passive victims but active political agents (Tripp, 2015).

Obstacles do not permit one to deny in a bit that there has been a successful hegemony of patriarchal resistance and state repression that ends up discrediting, weakening women's struggle for more political representation and equality. Such feminist movements face large obstacles in their path, ranging from repression by the state apparatus to patriarchal backlash and socio-political marginalisation. For example, land rights and cultural preservation advocacy efforts of indigenous women's movements are challenged through institutional racism and governmental neglect (Radcliffe, 2015). In South Asia, patriarchal backlash against women's groups surfaces not only from community leaders but also from state actors, who might view such work as destabilising to tradition-based gender norms. Despite significant progress, women's political mobilisation continues to confront entrenched patriarchal and state resistance. Such hegemonic structures often undermine feminist activism by discrediting women's demands for representation and equality.

This, of course, demands durability and flexibility to maintain these movements in such an atmosphere. Feminist movements across the Global South face persistent challenges, including state repression, patriarchal backlash, and institutional neglect. Indigenous women's land-rights activism often encounters racism and bureaucratic obstruction (Radcliffe, 2015). In South Asia, community leaders and state actors alike resist feminist advocacy that threatens traditional gender hierarchies. Yet these movements persist, demonstrating resilience and adaptability in hostile political environments. Similarly, in South Africa, women's rights activists fight against gender-based violence by working in unison with local and global human

rights organisations. Thus, they have more strength in their voices and further access to resources to continue with their programs despite the opposition (Gqola, How the ‘cult of femininity’ and violent masculinities support endemic gender based violence in contemporary South Africa, 2007)

In addition, these movements mobilise grassroots education and community-based organising to garner support from the inside. Leading to not only challenge patriarchal norms by disseminating awareness but also build grassroots support that is stronger, sturdier and can better weather pressure from the outside world. Feminist movements thus demonstrate tenacity by finding ways to continue pursuing their goals despite living in dire contexts. Typically, these feminist movements face what might be called extreme pushbacks, involving state repression, patriarchal backlash, and socio-political marginalisation. For instance, in Latin America, indigenous women's movements deal with institutional racism and governmental neglect that is compounded by their work for land rights and cultural preservation (Radcliffe, 2015). Once again, feminist organisations in South Asia experience patriarchal backlash at the community level and from state actors who find their work disturbs established gender roles.

These movements come with huge resilience and elasticity to sustain themselves against such opposition.

In South Africa, women's rights warriors join forces with local and international organisations promoting human rights to battle their cause of gender-based violence. Further cementing their platforms by gaining more resources to carry on the fight despite others' opposition (Gqola, How the ‘cult of femininity’ and violent masculinities support endemic gender based violence in contemporary South Africa, 2007).

All these strategies of feminist movements show them their strength in moving forward despite hostile circumstances.

Policy Recommendations

1. Protection of Labour Rights:

Governments and international bodies must ensure fair wages, workplace safety, maternity benefits, and the right to unionise for women in export-oriented sectors. Implementing ILO

standards would reduce exploitation and align national labour laws with gender-inclusive frameworks.

2. Rights of Indigenous Land and Culture:

Policies should legally recognise indigenous women’s land sovereignty and resource rights. Integrating gender and environmental impact assessments into development projects would curb neo-colonial extraction and strengthen indigenous governance systems (Rousseau, 2018).

3. Intersectional Policy Design:

Development planning must integrate caste, race, class, and gender variables. An intersectional lens prevents reproduction of exclusionary hierarchies in welfare and education policy (Crenshaw, 1989; Rege, 1998).

4. Peace-Building and Political Participation:

Institutionalising women’s representation in post-conflict governance-drawing from Liberia and Rwanda-can embed gender equality in reconstruction frameworks. Training and funding local women’s networks ensures long-term inclusion (Tripp, 2015).

By synthesising these contributions and converting them to practical policy, global feminist discourse can shift towards a truly inclusive one. The Global South emerges not as a marginal site to test theories that already exist, but as an evolved site for new feminist theorising and practices. To share meaningful pathways for transformation with other movements across the globe.

Conclusion

Feminist movements in the Global South effectively disrupt and contest the dominant Western framework of feminist theory and practice. Through initiatives that emphasise an intersectional, decolonial, and cultural perspective to gender justice. The social and political struggles against the ideologies of neoliberal globalisation, colonialism, and traditional patriarchal practices have produced sites of alternative knowledge production, that are more reflective of the complex realities of women's lives.

The areas of focus identified, labour in the context of neoliberalism, indigenous feminist movement and activism, race/class/gender intersections, and political literacy, activism. Clearly demonstrating that local interventions can be locally situated and culturally relevant while remaining connected to global networks of solidarity and activism.

One of the key contributions of feminist movements in the Global South, is women have been able to mobilize to counter patriarchy, exploitative labour conditions, indigenous land extinguishment, etc., is the ability to integrate local mobilising efforts with a transnational solidarity strategy. To consolidate intersecting forms of feminist advocacy to realize social change under hostile political circumstances.

Moving beyond the Global South, feminist movements that can connect collective well-being with land and resource sovereignty, prioritise culturally specific forms of resistance, are important baselines for feminist practice.

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ⁱ The **feminisation of labour**-a term describing the increasing concentration of women in low-wage, insecure employment-has reshaped sectors such as textiles, electronics, and agriculture. While providing new income sources, these jobs remain marked by low pay and limited protection (Edmonds et al., 2019; Fernandez-Kelly, 1984).