

ECONOMY AND FINANCE

# FEMINIST ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS

For a Just and Sustainable Future in MENA  
and Beyond

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Capitalist economic theories and practices have shaped our globalized socio-economic system and normalized the exploitation of women's labor, the extraction and destruction of nature, and neocolonial governance within our global financial system.



The majority of people in the MENA region, as in much of the rest of the Global South, bear the brunt of the social, economic, and ecological crises caused by these systems of oppression and exploitation.



Implementing feminist ecological economic models and employing economic indicators that account for both ecological and social wellbeing is imperative in addressing the crises at hand and fostering a more just and sustainable world.



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## 1

# INTRODUCTION

The first academic discipline in the world to face a transnational student rebellion against its teachings is Economics<sup>1</sup> (Raworth, 2017). (Neo)classical economic theories that are still being taught in universities around the world are accused of being detached from reality, unable to predict crises, and too focused on clean mathematical equations. These theories do not take into account vital non-market economic activities and turn a blind eye to the importance of ecological sustainability and regeneration. In practice, it has become clearer than ever that the dominant capitalist economic system is causing catastrophic damage to humans and non-humans and is exacerbating social inequalities, deepening poverty, exacerbating food insecurity, and wreaking havoc on natural habitats and the climate.

The field of feminist ecological economics opposes economic theories and practices that are in line with capitalism and aims to dismantle the hierarchies of dominance and the myths that have guided exploitative economic activity globally. Feminist ecological economics thus examines and creates solutions for three main issues facing our socio-economic system under growth-driven capitalism<sup>2</sup>. First, it discusses the devaluation of care labor and its impact on inequality and on the socio-economic conditions of women. Second, it examines the ecological crisis and the implications of natural resources being treated as infinite and free. And third, it exposes and challenges the continuation of colonial relations in today's global economic system.

This publication will look at these three feminist ecological critiques of conventional capitalist thinking, focusing on the context of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region but also considering global trends. The publication

explores why and how feminist ecological economics can enable us to build a just and sustainable world for ourselves and the generations to come.

<sup>1</sup> Economics students formed a network in over 30 countries that connected 80 different student groups demanding the teachings of economics to “catch up with the current generation” following the global financial crisis of 2007. They rejected mainstream theories through protests and open letters and boldly declared that “the revolution of economics has begun” (Raworth, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Growth-driven capitalism is a term that refers to the dependency of the capitalist system on an economic growth paradigm. This paradigm assumes that infinite economic growth is possible, that social crises could be resolved through economic growth, and that a healthy economy can be measured through economic growth.

## 2

## CARE LABOR: ESSENTIAL, EXPLOITED, SHUNNED

### FEMINIST ECONOMICS AND THE INSTITUTION OF MOTHERHOOD

Feminist economics emerged over a century ago analyzing the relationship between care labor and the oppression of women in the context of industrialization. Since then, feminist economists, intellectuals and activists explored the relationship between care labor and the economy and highlighted the countless negative implications it has on women in all their diversity.

In her classic book *Of Woman Born* (1976), feminist author Adrienne Rich explored the formation of the “institution of motherhood” under patriarchy and the capitalist system, which gave rise to the gendered division of labor in the early 20th century in. She described how capitalist patriarchy led to (1) the exclusion of women from the labor market due to the threat that their inclusion causes to men’s economic dominance, (2) the isolation of women and children from broader family units and from spaces of production - creating the modern-day private home, and (3) assigning mothers all care and emotional labor within the nuclear family in service of current and future male waged laborers.

In the MENA region, the institution of motherhood has been enshrined in and regulated through religious family laws as well as labor, taxation, and social protection laws, all of which reinforce the conventional gender role of the male bread-winner and the female care-giver. Women in the region therefore spend about 6 times the amount of time that men spend on unpaid care work – this includes caring for children and the sick, preparing meals for the family, and maintaining the cleanliness of the household (OECD, 2020). This, coupled with limited adequate and affordable care-related services and high overall unemployment rates, translates to a very low participation for women in the formal labor market – at only 19% in 2022 (World Bank, 2023).

Employed women with unpaid care responsibilities suffer from a “motherhood penalty” in formal labor markets - where they are systematically disadvantaged and given less opportunities to grow in their careers. Many women have no choice but to enter precarious informal employment with little or no protection for their rights, and they

must carry out this work while still performing all the unpaid care labor required of them. Across the world, women’s expected lifetime earnings are 172 trillion US Dollars less than men’s (BMZ, 2023), leaving them financially dependent on and controlled by men.

### THE MOST EXPLOITED FORM OF PAID LABOR

When paid, domestic care labor is one of the most under-protected and exploited professions globally, and more so in the MENA region. Paid domestic work in Arab speaking countries amounts to 12.3% of total employment and women domestic workers represent a staggering 34.6% of all women employees (ILO, 2021). Yet over 99% of domestic workers do not have any social protection benefits and work under exploitative and dangerous working conditions<sup>3</sup> because they are excluded from most labor laws in the region (ILO, 2021).

Within an ecofeminist perspective, care labor extends beyond domestic work to care for the land and for non-humans. 43% of small-scale farmers worldwide are women (OXFAM, 2023). In the MENA region, the agricultural sector accounts for about 23% of women’s employment (ESCWA, 2023). Many other women work on their families’ farms where their agricultural labor is seen as an extension of their domestic care duties. Just like domestic care labor, farming work is excluded from most labor laws in countries across the region, denying a large number of working women from attaining labor rights protections. Moreover, a survey of 9 countries in the MENA region showed that women own only about 5% of privately-held land, making this the region with the lowest prevalence of female land-ownership in the world (ESCWA, 2023).

### CARE LABOR AND ECONOMIC INDICATORS

While entrenching the gendered division of labor described above, the capitalist patriarchal institution of motherhood

<sup>3</sup> In many countries in the MENA region, migrant domestic workers’ labor and lives are regulated through the infamous Kafala System whereby workers are subjected to many labor and human rights violations.

has diminished the value of care. In this way, the most essential form of labor to functioning societies and economies has also become the most poorly paid and most neglected within economic discussions and equations. It is estimated that annually, the amount of unpaid care labor performed by women is worth 10.8 trillion US Dollars (Coffey et al, 2020), which is more than the net revenue of the top 50 companies in the world in 2018 (Biss, 2021). Yet, unpaid care labor is excluded from economic calculations like GDP - not as an accident but as an intentional decision by economists. GDP was born in the wake of the Second World War with a framework that was meant to accommodate the war economy (i.e., analyzing what is being produced and what needed to be sacrificed in terms of consumption to ensure that there are enough financial resources to support the war effort) (Criado Perez, 2019). At the time, the economic value of care was acknowledged, but not included in the "economy", largely because economists concluded that the relevant data would be too difficult to collect (Criado Perez, 2019). Caroline Criado Perez notes that "like so many decisions to exclude women in the interests of simplicity, from architecture to medical research, this conclusion could only be reached in a culture that conceives of men as the default and women as the niche aberration".

The exclusion of women's labor in economic calculations has since become the norm, thereby reinforcing patriarchal gender divisions. For instance, the United Nations System of National Accounts excludes unpaid care labor (Waring, 1988). 34 years after the feminist critique of this exclusion, an Expert Advisory Group on National Accounts recommended that unpaid care labor be measured and included within the 2008 System of National Accounts Framework, but this is yet to be put into practice (UNSTAT, 2020).

## WOMEN AS SHOCK ABSORBERS

The issues discussed above showcase the degree to which prevailing economic relations enable and rely upon the exploitation of women's (under)paid and unpaid labor. This provides a gendered critique of 'trickle-down theory', which assumes that financial gains accumulated by wealthy individuals or corporations will have positive knock-on effects for smaller businesses and employees, ultimately benefiting all. It also demonstrates how patriarchal capitalist states in the MENA region are failing to close gender gaps in employment, income level, asset ownership, and social protection coverage.

This leads to major repercussions for women's realities and makes them the "shock absorbers" of economic crises, wherein they are forced to substitute for reduced public spending and diminishing public services while navigating precarious working conditions. During crises, women are the first to lose access to public services and employment, especially informal jobs and those within the public sector. As public services are reduced, women are often

forced to stand in as substitutes by providing care free of charge. The Covid-19 pandemic was the clearest example of this; in the MENA region, unemployment rose among women just as the intensity of their unpaid care labor multiplied to include homeschooling, caring for the sick and more - without any adequate response or compensation from states to address these negative outcomes (Abou Habib, 2020).

## 3

## CAPITALIST MYTHS VS. ECOLOGICAL WELLBEING

### FEMINISM AND RATIONALIST ECONOMICS

Ecofeminist analysis offers insights about the similarities between the patterns of oppression and exploitation that both women and nature endure under patriarchy and the systems that sustain it. From a Marxist ecofeminist perspective, the capitalist patriarchal system exploits both the unpaid and underpaid labor of women and the natural resources of the Earth for profit accumulation. Ecofeminists see that the constructed right to ownership is used to justify exploitation, oppression, and violence against women and nature. The notion that humans (mainly men) own the land and therefore are free to do whatever they will with it, is similar to patriarchal ideas about men's ownership of women's bodies. Moreover, the patriarchy portrays men as rational beings whose duty it is to control both women and nature that are often portrayed.

The patriarchal notion of the "rational" man was widely incorporated into economics, creating the concept of Homo Economicus, or "economic man". This concept is based on the idea that individuals' behavior within economic related activities are logical, efficient and predictable. That individuals will always act on self-interest to maximize gain and will always avoid wasting resources or expenditure. This completely ignores the intricate dynamics of human behavior from a psychological and social point of view, including socially constructed gendered dynamics. It also uses patriarchal image of "man" as the standard human condition.

This rationalist economic thinking also guided the obsession of economists in clean mathematical equations. Such economists strived, and continue to strive, to fit economic theories into a science box, one that makes economics comparable to quantum or astrophysics (Raworth, 2017), despite the fact that these over-simplified theories have been proven to be incapable of adequately predicting outcomes or accounting for the various variables that impact, and are impacted by, economic activity.

### THE TRAGIC PRIVATIZATION AND DESTRUCTION OF THE COMMONS

In 1968, American ecologist Garrett Hardin wrote a paper titled the "tragedy of the commons", which argued that in-

dividuals' usage of habitats and resources without restriction is ultimately doomed to deplete or destroy that habitat or resource. The issue with Hardin's theory is that it perpetuates a capitalist view of societies and stems from rationalist economic thinking. It assumes that individuals are selfish by nature and would use more than what sustains them and that individuals lack the ability to think communally and care about the wellbeing of their broader communities. It also presumes that the commons are characterized by open-access, which ignores the countless examples from across the world where the commons flourished under community management. The "tragedy of the commons" was challenged by many feminist and environmental scholars and activists who saw how these assumptions have been used as a pretext for the dispossession and privatization of the commons (Raworth, 2017).

In the MENA region, corrupt or undemocratic states greatly mismanaged the commons, resulting in their pollution, privatization and destruction. In almost all counties in the region, fresh water is polluted (then processed and sold), beaches and natural spaces are turned into profit making projects that most people cannot afford to enjoy, and air is becoming increasingly polluted (causing health issues amidst diminishing healthcare services). In Lebanon for example, over 80% of the 220 km coastline is currently privatized although Lebanon's coast is considered public property by law. This resulted in increased pollution of sea water and endangerment of rare wild-life due to limited or non-existent state-regulation, as well as a lack of access to beaches for the majority of people (Courtat et al, 2023).

Across the globe, "green grabbing" is alarmingly increasing. This process, whereby the commons are privatized in the name of environmental sustainability, often results in the disposition of people's land and resources. Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates for instance acquired agricultural land in countries in Africa and Asia, especially land around the Nile Basin (Henderson, 2021), strengthening the food security of high-income countries at the expense of the food security of low-income countries.

## TILL GROWTH DO US PART

The capitalist myth of green-growth has swept the globe as those with wealth and power continue to do business as usual with minimal disruption despite the imminent climate catastrophe facing the world and the growing mass movements opposing capitalism. Feminists and environmentalists alike have heavily critiqued the economic system's focus on growth for its role in deepening inequalities and worsening the ecological crisis (Kallis et al., 2020; Dengler et al., 2023). They have highlighted how growth has never been achieved without the consumption of great amounts of energy, the extraction of natural resources or the exploitation of labor (including domestic care labor), and that growth indicators like growing GDP are actually "an alarming indicator of unsustainability at this point in history" (Czech, 2023). The concept of green-growth has thus been denounced as an oxymoron and an over-simplified solution to a catastrophic problem (The Conversation, 2021).

Policy- and decision-makers across the MENA region continue to invest in ecologically destructive industrial activities that promote short-term growth at the expense of those that could resolve the many socio-economic challenges they face. The region suffers from high unemployment rates for instance, a major socio-economic issue that has been persistent and increasing. Many countries in the region still promote economic growth in hopes of fostering job creation, despite evidence that this outcome often goes unrealized (Islam et al., 2022). The MENA region is also the world's largest importer of arms (Beinin et al, 2021), and various countries continuously increase their military spending despite the many social and ecological implications of militarization, war and conflict. Many countries in the region invest in the grey economy<sup>4</sup>, which brings contracts and huge profits to construction companies but only short-term employment opportunities for construction workers. Such activities are often short-sighted and unsustainable, with little long-term investment in socially-beneficial services and structures. For example, in the midst of its economic crises between 2019 and 2021, Egypt increased spending in its grey economy by 90% (Business Today, 2021) in an attempt to strengthen the country's economy, increase annual growth, and "pull Egypt through the economic shock of the pandemic" without actually addressing any structural economic issues (Ebrahim and Lewis, 2021).

## FACING REALITY OR BEARING THE CONSEQUENCES

Feminist ecological economic models and movements that offer holistic solutions are continually attacked by media actors and policy-makers worldwide. Post-growth economic theories have advanced immensely in the past few

years and have been widely endorsed by many environmental and feminist economists for their ability to address today's global socio-economic and ecological challenges. Yet, activists, academics and movements that support these theories are mischaracterized by major economic news platforms and neoclassical economists who still hold on to economic concepts that have long failed in terms of both social equity and environmental sustainability (Schmelzer and Vansintjan, 2022). For instance, following the Beyond Growth conference in 2023, an article in the Economist called those who took part in the conference as the "lefty Europeans who want to shrink the economy" (The Economist, 2023). The arguments used in that article – like many used to attack post-growth economic theories - show either a very superficial understanding of these theories or a deliberate attempt to misinform readers.

Any economic solution to the ecological crisis that continues to treat natural resources as infinite or that shies away from facing the real, existential, and catastrophic crisis facing us with serious and long-term measures can no longer be considered as a solution. As writer and philosopher Ayn Rand once said: "You can evade reality, but you cannot evade the consequences of evading reality" (Rand, 1961). We are nearing a number of ecological tipping points which we should avoid at all costs. This requires immediate and calculated shifts which must be designed and implemented in collaboration with social and ecological justice movements that are ready to face reality.

<sup>4</sup> The grey economy refers to the economic activities related to the construction of infrastructure like bridges, roads, school or hospital buildings, and dams. Grey refers to the color of concrete.



## 4

## COLONIALISM IS ALIVE AND WELL

### COLONIALISM IN OUR FINANCIAL GOVERNANCE SYSTEM

Power-imbalances are of prime concern to feminist thinkers. Within international economic governance and policy-making as well as in trade relations, there is a stark imbalance of power that follows the legacy of colonialism. The countries and corporations in the Global North hold control over decision-making processes, favoring their own economic interest over the interest of people in low- and middle-income countries in the Global South.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) are a perfect example of how colonialism in our international financial system is normalized. Both institutions give historically colonial nations more decision-making powers. Some argue that this is the case because wealthy nations provide the bigger portions of funding to the IMF and WB, but this is critiqued in anti-colonial spaces because the ability to provide more funding is greatly linked to the historical (and contemporary) plundering of resources and exploitation of labor. Moreover, as economist Jason Hickel states, "in any national political system, we would reject the notion that rich people should have more voting power than poor people, and more influence over economic policy decisions. We would see this as corrupt and morally repulsive" (Hickel, 2020). Feminists from across the globe called this "economic apartheid" and highlighted how the vote of one person from the Global North is on average equal in value to the votes of 8 people from the Global South within the IMF's governance system (Campaign of Campaigns, 2022).

The IMF and WB refuse to acknowledge their role in eroding social services and structures in the MENA region and across the Global South. These institutions promote capitalist myths like "no pain, no gain", which argues that low- and middle-income countries cannot achieve economic growth (gain for the wealthy) without austerity measures that increase inequality (pain for the poor). Or as economist Simon Kuznets theorized in 1955: for economies to "develop", the market has to first increase and then decrease inequalities (i.e., Kuznets Curve). In her book *Doughnut Economics*, Kate Raworth (2017) debunks this theory through various examples and further explains that "the WB treated the curve as an economic law and used it to

publish projections of how long it would take for poverty levels to start falling in low- and middle-income countries". A recent study shows how the IMF's economic projections in a number of countries in the MENA follows a similarly over-optimistic pattern, whereby the expected economic recovery following debt and austerity measures was never realized (Rehbein, 2022). The conditionalities and advice of the IMF and WB thus need to be questioned, given their huge impact on inequalities within countries across the MENA region and the wider Global South.

### THE ENDLESS CYCLE OF INDEBTEDNESS

Interventions by both the IMF and WB in the Global South have trapped countries in an endless cycle of debt and forced them to implement austerity measures, thereby increasing poverty and inequalities. The IMF, for instance, has encouraged 17 poor countries to cut 4 USD for every 1 USD spent on public goods in 2020 and 2021 as part of its loan conditionalities (Kentikelenis and Stubbs, 2023). Out of 148 countries in the Global South, 135 are in "a critical debt situation" (Rehbein, 2022). Public debt has increased five-fold in the last three decades, with low- and middle-income countries paying much higher interest rates than countries in the Global North like the United States or Germany (UN, 2023). Low- and middle-income countries in the Global South are also forced to repay debt in foreign currency without any consideration of fluctuations in the cost of exchange rates, exacerbating the indebtedness of the Global South to the Global North (UN, 2023).

The cycles of indebtedness for various countries in the Global South began with colonization. Pan-Africanist and Marxist revolutionary leader of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara, stated that "debt is neocolonialism, in which colonizers have transformed themselves into 'technical assistants.' We should rather say 'technical assassins'" (Sankara, 1987). If the endless cycles of economic exploitation and indebtedness burdening Global South Countries are not broken (whether through debt cancellation, swap, or de-

fault<sup>5</sup>), countries within the Global South will be stuck in a growth economic paradigm that paralyzes their efforts of diminishing inequalities and achieving ecological sustainability and regeneration (Stevenson, 2023). In other words, debt and debt interest repayment require economic growth, therefore, shifting to post-growth economics that can achieve social and ecological justice will not be possible if the cycles of indebtedness are not broken.

## CAPITAL, MILITARISM, AND COLONIALISM

Arms production brings immense financial profits to historically colonizing nations and has greatly affected the political and economic landscapes of countries in the Global South. As researcher Dr. Shana Marshall writes, “international economic and financial policy that prioritizes investments in military over civilian projects is accelerating the militarization of the regional political economy [in MENA]” (Beinin et al., 2021).

The military and police institutions as well as intelligence structures in the contemporary states of the MENA region were originally designed by colonizers to enforce their rule and support their WW2 efforts. After Independence and gradually over time, these institutions and structures were given roles in economic “development” projects (e.g., manufacturing, construction, and service provision) and access to land, labor, goods and public financing, including fuel and electricity subsidies and special access to bidding processes (Beinin et al., 2021). The environmental damages created by these development projects are never assessed and the implications on women’s socio-economic conditions that these economic privileges have (e.g., shifts in national budgets from social services to subsidies for military institutions) are mostly ignored.

## THE WHITE-FINANCIAL-SAVIOR COMPLEX

The colonial white-savior complex<sup>6</sup> that was used to justify colonial interventions still lingers within international financial relations and governance as countries across the Global North claim to offer beneficent development aid to countries of the Global South. However, reports that have comprehensively assessed North-South financial trans-

fers tell a very different story. In fact, the financial inflows to countries in the Global South from donor countries are dwarfed by the amounts of outflows that leave the Global South towards countries in the North – at a 1 USD to 14 USD ratio (Hickel et al., 2017). These economic drains, which include huge amounts of cheaply bought raw materials and goods as well as low-waged labor, increased greatly since the 1980s, when neoliberal Structural Adjustments Programs were imposed by International Funding Institutions (IFIs), namely the IMF and WB (Hickel et al., 2017).

IFIs along with international corporations and many Global North governments have also claimed to champion gender equality and green transformation within the Global South. But they have often done so through approaches that are more harming than helpful. Specifically, they have mainstreamed neoliberal feminism – a Eurocentric- and middle-class version of feminism that claims to be able to achieve gender justice simply through the inclusion of women in labor markets and in high paying jobs, rather than through transformative change that addresses the many systems that oppress and exploit women across the globe.

IFIs and Global North governments have also focused narrowly on supporting and funding green energy projects in Global South countries, rather than addressing their own responsibility for the global ecological crisis. Funding projects in the Global South becomes a diversion from more fundamental changes to limit wealthy countries’ greenhouse gas emissions or pay reparations for the ecological damages they have historically caused. Tunisia for instance – a country that is historically responsible for only 0.7% of global greenhouse gas emissions but that is already experiencing the harsh impact of climate change – makes large investments in such growth generating projects as advised by the IMF, marginally lowering global greenhouse gas emissions, while making much smaller investments in adaptation projects that can help it cope with the impacts of climate change (Observatoire Tunisien de l’Economie, 2022).

IFIs have additionally mainstreamed economic-focused narratives and projects around climate change and gender injustice across the Global South. These narratives frame climate change as a threat to economic stability rather than a threat to humanity and the wellbeing of the planet. Similarly, they frame gender equality, especially within the economic sphere, as a driver of economic growth rather than a human rights and social justice issue. These neocolonial institutions retain power among those who benefit most from the status quo, greatly hindering all efforts to shift our current socio-economic and political system away from a monetized growth-driven model, towards a just and ecologically sustainable one.

5 There are many movements across the world calling for a complete cancellation of public debt, especially the debt taken from IFIs by low-income countries. Debt swap on the other hand aims to shift fiscal spending from debt repayment to development related spending (e.g. debt-for-climate). Debt default refers to either the inability of a country to repay its debt or a conscious decision by a state to refuse repayment in order to meet its other commitments (e.g. social spending).

6 The white-savior complex is a term used to explain the ways in which harmful colonial interventions were justified by colonizers. These justifications often came from a place of superiority, presuming that Black, Indigenous and people of color needed rescuing. The white-savior complex also refers to the misconceptions of the colonizers who believe they know exactly what the colonized need and the trajectory in which they must attain it.

## 5

## TOWARDS A GLOBAL SYSTEM THAT PRIORITIZES LIFE

### THE BASICS OF FEMINIST ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS

Implementing a feminist ecological economic model will require a lot of changes, all of which are built on the fact that prosperity and progress are attainable without exploitative and destructive processes that aim to achieve growth and wealth accumulation. Such a model would be guided by feminist values like solidarity, collaboration, and most importantly, care - care for oneself, for loved-ones, for the community, and for the environment and the wider planet.

For one, a feminist ecological economic model requires a change in objectives, from fostering endless growth to meeting the basic needs of everyone while remaining within our ecological limits – which is not the unattainable dream that capitalist actors try to portray. Studies show that meeting everyone's basic needs does not require unbridled economic growth, but rather a redistribution of wealth (namely through progressive taxation). Meeting the needs of everyone does not mean that we must damage and deplete our ecosystems either; rather, it requires an adjustment of lifestyle – whereby consumerism, luxury and excessive profit-making become things of the past.

Secondly, a feminist ecological approach to economics requires an epistemic shift. The aspiration of (neo)classical economists to “make economics a science as reputable as physics” through rigid economic laws that presumably explain consumer behavior, the market, and national output is proven to be unrealistic (Raworth, 2017). Feminist ecological economists have to be comfortable with the fact that the economy is not a clean mathematical or mechanical process and must derive their theories and interventions from the fact that many dynamic and complex social and ecological variables interplay to shape our economic systems.

Feminist ecological economic models are generating economic indicators that measure ecological and social wellbeing, some of which are already being used and are gaining prominence. Degrowth and Doughnut Economics are great examples of such models that not only aim to address the ecological crisis, but incorporate feminist principles into their foundations. The New Economics Foundation's Happy Planet Index, Scotland's Wellbeing Economy

Monitor, and Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index have all been used as economic indicators that guide policy-making and have led to great improvements in ecological and social wellbeing (Butt et al, 2023). These models and indicators should be used or adapted to create similar outcomes in the MENA region.

### RE-EVALUATING WORK AND CENTERING CARE

The capitalist myth that claims that only paid and productive labor is work must be debunked. Unpaid labor in all its forms, from activism and voluntary work to care and emotional labor, are absolutely vital to the sustainability and progress of our socio-economic system.

Centering care in our systems begins with gathering accurate time-use data on unpaid care labor and including its economic value in economic equations and indicators. This entails using the input method which calculates the amount of unpaid care labor performed, who performs it, for whom it is performed, and where it is performed, as well as the intermediate goods and services yielded - including goods that are turned into final “products” within the household - among other factors (UNSTAT, 2020).

Re-evaluating work in the MENA region must include the expansion of social protection schemes that usually cover only formally employed individuals. Feminist and social justice actors in MENA are already pushing for social protection systems that cover informal, seasonal, and unpaid care workers while also aiming for establishing a universal basic income that covers all residents throughout their life-cycles. Essential occupations like farming and paid domestic work have to immediately become protected through national labor laws across the region, and they must also be better paid. Equal pay for work of equal value should be the norm – with a clear recognition of the true value of care labor to our socio-economic system.

States must take serious steps towards overcoming the inequalities related to the current organization of care, guaranteeing that everyone is receiving the care they need by providing care services and decent care jobs. The ILO's 5R framework (i.e., recognize, reduce, and redistribute un-

paid care work, and (fairly) reward and represent paid care workers) offers an important roadmap within this context.

However, we have to avoid falling into the capitalist trap of commodifying care. Care is a feminist value and resistance strategy in a system that continuously denies people the space and opportunity to receive and provide care to our loved ones and our communities as well as to practice self-care. Feminist actors across the Globe are calling for care to be considered as a human right, and various countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have already committed themselves to advancing care as a right through the Buenos Aires Commitment which aims at “charting a path towards a care society” (ECLAC, 2022). To achieve this globally, our socio-economic system must enable us all to care for ourselves and those around us without compromising our ability to meet our basic needs. Shorter working hours and fewer work days, adequate parental leave, and flexible working conditions, along with the provision of care-related services, can all support this effort.

## LIFE-SUSTAINING PRODUCTION

Life-destroying sectors such as fossil fuels extraction, arms production, militarization, and large-scale construction that bring massive profits for the wealthy are still expanding to this day, shifting available fiscal space and funding away from life-sustaining sectors (i.e., health, education, care, sustainable transport and food production, climate adaptation and mitigation). The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) states that “with just \$300 billion USD, we can buy up to 20 years to address this global [ecological] crisis. However, the unfortunate reality is that this is the same amount of money the world spends on military investments every 60 days” (WILPF, 2023).

Because the MENA region is more susceptible to the negative impacts of climate change in comparison to the global average, social movements in this region must continue to hold governments accountable. They must demand that both national and international economic actors stop ignoring the catastrophic magnitude of the ecological crisis that will only exacerbate existing injustices. This, in turn, requires shifting their focus from short-term growth towards long-term sustainability. Moreover, social movements have to broadly denounce monetary solutions to the ecological crises (e.g. carbon tax) that allow corporations to continue business as usual without any change in extractive and ecologically destructive practices.

Despite the fact that individual ecologically-sustaining efforts alone cannot create the necessary change in our system, as ecofeminist Reham Kannout Alrefaei says, “today we need to reaffirm meaningful individual action and personal choices as methods of boycott and rejection of modern patterns of consumption, global supply chains, and consumerism [...]. It can be a steppingstone towards just and compassionate realities as opposed to the brutal sys-

tems that govern our lives and destroy the natural world” (Kannout Alrefaei, 2023).

## DEMOCRACY AT ALL LEVELS

Strengthening democratic values and horizontal governance at the levels of the global financial system, the national government, the community, and the household should be a central issue in the transition to a feminist ecological economic system. This ensures that those who have been historically marginalized are present to create the policies and solutions that impact their own wellbeing and livelihoods, and those of their communities.

Democratic values and horizontal governance cannot be strengthened and practiced without dismantling imbalances of power. This means that certain forms of oppressive and patriarchal power (e.g. power over) have to be abolished and replaced with positive and feminist forms of power (e.g. transformative power).<sup>7</sup>

In practice, this requires (1) strengthening the decision-making powers of low- and middle-class countries on the global financial stage; (2) establishing or strengthening democratic governance at the national levels within countries in MENA and across the globe, (3) shifting to a cooperative-based economy whereby power is shared by the workers rather than the shareholders, (4) providing space for workers’ organizing and strengthening trade unions, (5) reclaiming the commons as a public good to be governed by the people, (6) strengthening women’s decision-making powers within the household, which requires diminishing the economic dependence of women on their male relatives through the provision of decent work opportunities and inclusive social protection mechanisms, and (7) vastly improving the representation of women, queer, differently-abled individuals, and those of marginalized ethnicities, religious beliefs, age groups, education levels, and residency or nationality statuses in all the above mentioned spheres.

## INTERSECTIONALITY AS OUR COMPASS

Although intersectional feminism was based on the concept of Multiple Jeopardy, a term coined by Deborah King in 1988 to recognize how injustices can intersect and reinforce one another (Davis et al., 2022), feminism is the only social movement that have concretely and systematically articulated a clear position and approach using intersectional analysis. Today, intersectional feminism has come to be seen as the only valid feminist school of thought due

<sup>7</sup> As per Just Associates (JASS), “power over” is a problematic form of power whereby one group or person exerts power over another. This form of power is often abused to exert dominance (Harvey and Safier, 2021). Transformative power, as JASS describes, “offers positive ways of expressing power that create the possibility of forming more equitable relationships and structures and transforming power over. By affirming people’s capacity to act creatively and collectively, they provide some basic principles for constructing empowering strategies” (Harvey and Safier, 2021).

to its ability to analyze the realities of women in all their diversity and actively oppose the intersecting forms of oppression that negatively impact their lives and livelihoods.

In the midst of all the crises facing us today, all movements must acknowledge the interconnectedness of oppressive systems and the hierarchies upon which they rely, which in turn shape our socio-economic and political systems. The change that is required, especially in light of the great resistance against feminist and environmental movements, will not be possible without the formation of long-term alliances that are able to analyze the issues facing us today in an intersectional way that ensures the formulation of holistic solutions. It is vital that all movements – whether they call for gender, social, economic, racial or environmental justice – recognize that their struggles are anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist, and anti-colonial. Only then will we be able to push for a socio-economic and political system that meets our 21st century needs.

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# FEMINIST ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS

## FOR A JUST AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE IN MENA AND BEYOND



Neoclassical economic theories, especially those that promote capitalism, have failed to address our global ecological crisis while also entrenching existing gender injustices. Yet they are still used, promoted and defended by influential economic actors. This greatly impacts the socio-political and economic landscapes within which people and movements pursue change in the MENA region, ultimately hindering their efforts at meaningful systemic transformation.



Three intersecting systems of oppression – patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism – uphold the current economic system and maintain existing imbalances of power. These systems disadvantage women in all their diversity and the people of the Global South who are bearing the brunt of the various global crises. They also ignore and exacerbate the ecological crisis despite the global mass movements and the mounting scientific evidence calling for a change in the system.



The field of feminist ecological economics offers a new way of thinking about our socio-economic system in service of ecological, social and gender justice. Feminist principles like solidarity, care, participatory leadership and decision-making, and intersectionality are the cornerstones of a feminist ecological economic system that could mitigate the crises facing us today and foster a just and sustainable tomorrow.