



The
Political
Economics of
Sex

By Edie V
for Total Woman Victory

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can never become the privileges of all. . . Hence, a feminist strategy for liberation cannot but aim at the total abolition of all these relationships of retrogressive progress. . . As long as exploitation of one of these remains the precondition for the advance (development, evolution, progress, humanisation, etc.) of one section of people, feminists cannot speak of liberation.”¹⁴

The feminist project must work towards creating value outside of capital and building communities, and more broadly a society, in which we all—especially men—share in the labor that makes life worth living and a world worth living in.

Civilization was created in part through the development of social stratification and labor specialization. Both phenomena gave men the opportunity to divorce themselves from the meat of life, offloading the labor of subsistence onto women: child-rearing, growing and cooking food, cleaning, hygiene. This primitive accumulation of resources and exploitation of women has evolved throughout the centuries, mainly under the institution of the family, the organizational force through which these contradictions are enforced.

In *Mothers and Others*, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy¹ tracks the evolution of humanity towards civilization and the subsequent shift towards patrilocal communities. Where resources were accumulated, paternity had to be ensured; women were confined to the “private” realm as property and policed as such, creating the division of labor in which men were “protectors” and conquerors of property: warriors, religious and political leaders. During this time women began giving birth earlier with shorter intervals between. Women had more children—and more work—with less help: first separated from their family by their husband, then from their husband through customs that defined manhood.

This division of labor made the toil of waged labor during the industrial revolution an easy sell for men: being divorced from the necessities of life was considered “freedom,” or at least an elevation above being a woman who must toil for free. In this sense, Silvia Federici reframes the concept of “wage slavery,” choosing instead to focus on what she calls the “patriarchy of the wage”: “if it is true that male workers became only formally free under the new wage-labor regime, the group of workers

who, in the transition to capitalism, most approached the conditions of slaves was working-class women.”² Men, to this day, operate under the belief that women must be made to birth children at an early and unhealthy rate solely because it keeps them tied to the labor of subsistence, often in addition to exploitative “feminized” waged labor, retaining the realm of “freeing” waged labor for men.

For most of recorded history, women’s access to money and financial stability was only possible through proximity and deference to men. Relatively recently, a substantial minority of women have been able to accumulate their own wealth through participation in well-paid waged labor, thereby gaining independence from men. Under current conditions, some women can only be “freed” by emulating a man: remaining childless and single, her ability to perform waged labor unencumbered by unpaid domestic labor. This is evidenced by the findings of sociologist Joya Misra: motherhood is now a greater predictor of wage inequality than sex.³

While it is true that waged labor creates independence for women, freeing us from the interpersonal tyranny of men, it cannot be the basis of a liberatory politics. This conception of “freedom” can only be achieved through the means that men first achieved it: by offloading the labor of subsistence onto others, primarily lower class women, often in poorer regions of the country and across the world. And yet liberal “feminism,” the most powerful feminist political movement today, has rallied around this goal. Many women in wealthy countries fight only for a future in which they are freed from the constraints of everyday necessity. The work of this ideology stops there—without concrete ideas of what comes next, consumerism has filled the time “freed” from subsistence.

their “freedom” on waged labor, yoking the value of their lives to capital.

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild asked, “The homemaker of the 1950s is no longer at home, and so we must ask, ‘Who is going to do her work?’” The answer should have been obvious: it was always going to be another, more marginalized woman. A more pressing question for feminists now is not who will continue shouldering the outsized burden of subsistence for all, but how we can collectively reframe this “burden” as the valuable labor necessary for building up ourselves and our communities. Humanity has been wildly successful at resource accumulation and labor productivity to the extent that a more fair allocation of resources is beyond possible: anthropologist Jason Hickel and social scientist Dylan Sullivan found that, “provisioning decent living standards (DLS) for 8.5 billion people would require only 30% of current global resource and energy use.”¹³ ***A better world is possible, especially for women.***

Thus the answer is not for women to strive to live like men, relying on waged labor to define them, with little responsibility outside of waged labor, but rather for men—and some women—to understand that accepting the exploitation of someone else for “freedom” is no freedom at all; if one person is exploitable, then we all are. Emulating men within capitalist patriarchy was never an admirable goal nor was it a solution to either exploitative system; rather it’s a lowering of women’s potential and a turning away from the collective action required for feminism—for women, for society, for the Earth—to be healthy and vibrant. As Maria Mies contended, “In a contradictory and exploitative relationship, the privileges of the exploiters

sights on ways to make those gains redundant.

The flexibilisation of labor for everyone has led to a crisis: Phil Jones notes in *Work Without the Worker*, “There is a disjuncture growing between the ever slowing rate of job creation and the ever more rapidly expanding pool of workers dependent on a wage. As stagnant growth infects the global system, workers are pushed into ever more precarious and petty service work.”¹¹ Many of those workers, across the globe, are women, who will always lose to men in competition over waged labor, as evidenced by women bearing the brunt of job losses during COVID – the loss of economic advancement dubbed the “women’s recession.” Staking “freedom” on waged labor will always be a riskier gamble for women.

Liberal “feminists” myopic disregard for the intersection of sex and class has made them unable to realize that the miniscule gains they won through waged labor made misogynistic backlash inevitable. Gerda Lerner said, “In class society it is difficult for people who themselves have some power, however limited and circumscribed, to see themselves also as deprived and subordinated.”¹² Liberal “feminists” believed their ability to participate in waged labor, their newfound financial independence, could save them from the plight of other women. Yet conservative ideology is now raging across wealthy countries and reproductive exploitation is once again becoming the law of the land through attacks on birth control and abortion. Liberal “feminists” are shocked to learn the system they’ve chosen to embrace sees women, including them, as an exploitable resource. What they fail to understand is that they had already positioned themselves as an exploitable resource when they based

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Consumerism, in this respect, has adopted the intersections of class and sex. A minority of women’s newfound ability to accumulate wealth has transformed into conspicuous consumerism, a way to advertise their “empowerment” as women whose class position is recently decoupled from their relations to men. As a consequence, there is a burgeoning industry built on selling women “empowerment.” Social media has become nothing but advertisements and “influencers” hawking an image or a lifestyle through carefully curated content and affiliate links. In the words of Neil Postman, these influencers “tell nothing about the products being sold, but they tell everything about the fears, fancies and dreams of those who might buy them. What the advertiser needs to know is not what is right about the product but what is wrong about the buyer.”⁴ “Empowerment” is being sold to women in response to their alienation, encouraging them to spend their new leisure time on crafting mere images of themselves at the expense of their lives and communities.

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith warned, “the servant role of women is critical for the expansion of consumption in the modern economy.”⁵ Prices can remain

low enough for most women in wealthy countries to “express themselves” (consume) because of the stagnating wages of marginalized women in their own countries, where women make up the bulk of the lowest paid jobs, as well as the result of the staggering exploitation of women in poorer countries. As more women in wealthy countries grow increasingly poorer under the global totality of the feminization of poverty, liberal “feminists” will grow more reliant on conspicuous consumerism to maintain their class status, strengthening their allegiance to capitalism and reinforcing their “freedom” as inextricable from the exploitation of waged labor, alienating themselves further from their sisters.

The acquisition of commodities, then, cannot be “empowerment” nor can it even be a “privilege.” Consumerism divorces us from ourselves, our communities, and our sisters. Maria Mies said it best: “Empowerment can only be found in ourselves. This power does not come from dead money. It lies in mutuality and not in competition, in doing things ourselves and not in only passively consuming. It lies in generosity and the joy of working together and not in individualistic self-interest and jealousy. This power also lies in our recognition that all creatures on earth are our relatives” – that all women are our sisters.

Concurrently, labor that exists outside of commodification isn’t profitable nor is it taxable, which is why we’ve been taught, as Marie Mies argues, that “overcoming the realm of necessity is supposed to open the doors to freedom”⁶—we’ve been taught to look down on those who attend to the immediate everyday needs of human beings in order to make ourselves more vulnerable to exploita-

tion. Barbara Kingsolver addresses this propaganda in her novel *Demon Copperhead*: “money-earning [people] pay taxes. Whereas you can’t collect shit on what people grow and eat on the spot, or the work they swap with their neighbors. That’s like a percent of blood from a turnip. So, the ones in charge started cooking it into everybody’s brains to look down on the land people, saying we are an earlier stage of human, like junior varsity or cavemen.”⁷ In this way, Marie Mies argues, anyone who works outside the reaches of capitalism, laboring for something other than profit, occupies a similar social position as women in regards to labor.

Buying into consumerism is an inherent denigration of women’s labor because capitalism, as a whole, is built on patriarchal sexed divisions of labor. As Claudia von Werlhof pointed out in 1983, “There is no cheaper, more productive, and more fruitful human labour”⁸ than the housewife. Marilyn Waring, founder of feminist economics, noted that “evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that women’s invisibility [as housewives], institutionalized in the so-called developed world, was exported to the rest of the world via the national accounts as another tool of colonisation.”⁹ Men in poor countries are already aware that what Maria Mies calls “housewifisation’, that is, the flexibilisation of labour, has become reality for men also.”¹⁰ As unions in wealthy countries gained numerous rights for male workers over the past two hundred years, capitalists naturally set their

