KnowWar

Decolonial Feminist Methodologies and Transformative Knowledge Production in/on the Arab Region: The Case of Syrian Women

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Decolonial Feminist Methodologies and Transformative Knowledge Production in/on the Arab Region: The Case of Syrian Women

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ABSTRACT

While there is a literature which critiques Orientalist-colonialist approaches to analysing Arab (Third world) women, there is a lack of literature that focuses on the methodological and epistemological perspectives that contribute to the reproduction of orientalist-colonialist perspectives. This paper attempts to consider the possibilities that decolonial feminist methodologies can open up for exceeding this predicament, thus inviting further reflections on how decolonial feminist methodologies might be applied in scholarship by and on Arab women's struggles against the interconnected formations of patriarchy, war and settler colonialism in the region. It asks: what epistemological and methodological approaches and methods are required and can enable us to produce decolonial feminist knowledges that expose how interlocking modern power/coloniality shape women's lived experiences in order to facilitate its transformation? How can decolonial feminist knowledge production also be rethought as a process of collaboration with women who resist these material conditions?

The paper argues that the hegemony of liberal feminist approaches and the methodologies connected with them further the reproduction of the coloniality of power in the real social world and in the knowledge production on this social world. It offers examples from reports published by international organisations on Syrian women which reflect the limitations of overlooking structural forces that condition Syrian women's realities. The paper provides preliminary suggestions to think through and develop decolonial feminist methodologies that relink the decolonisation of knowledge production to practices that aim at decolonisation and the transformation of material structures of power.

KEYWORDS

Decolonial feminist methodologies, liberal feminism, Arab region, coloniality of power, war, settler colonialism

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Introduction

The Arab region is structured by a long history of Western modern capitalism and colonialism, imposed through wars, displacement, and destruction[2]. These realities are obscured by hegemonic forms of knowledge production in general, and through particular forms of knowledge production on Arab women's conditions that are characterised by an orientalist-culturalist logic which reduces women's life conditions to cultural-religious factors.

In this paper, we seek to think through and explore possible methodologies that can reconnect Arab women's everyday experiences, including the experiences of gendered and sexualised violence, to the systemic forces that structure and (re)reproduce these conditions. In doing so, this paper seeks to make a conceptual and methodological intervention. It is beyond the scope of this paper to directly engage with Arab and Syrian women's everyday struggles and material conditions. Instead, this paper seeks to rethink the epistemologies and methodologies through which knowledge about Arab women's realities is produced. Arab women increasingly confront overlapping forms of systemic violence, including gender-based and sexualised forms of violence in their public and private lives, in conditions of dispossession, permanent wars, and imperialist interventions linked to extractive economies. Yet, we are struck by the persistence of an orientalist analytic that locates the problem in fixed notions of 'culture' or 'traditions', and the durability of a liberal feminist analytical approach that narrowly focuses on isolated individuals. These hegemonic frameworks at best reify Arab women's realities and at worst obscure and distort the power dynamics at hand, in ways that reproduce the coloniality of power, while reinserting women back into systems that produced this violence to begin with. Our focus is on the methodological approaches that enable this reductionist logic.

We begin with the Marxist methodology, which focuses on the analysis of the historically specific structures and relations underlying the phenomena under consideration. We situate Arab women's conditions and the analytical depiction of these realities in the historical context of the Arab region. And we expand our analysis by drawing on indigenous and feminist decolonial perspectives and methodologies from the geographies of North and South America, and we reconnect these knowledges to the geographies in the Arab region in order to begin to map out and think through decolonial feminist methodologies in the Arab world. We use colonial/decolonial[3] perspectives to recover an analytic that understands modernity as founded upon interlocking processes of colonial settlement, conquest and capitalist exploitation that are based on racial regimes. This recovery of the colonial foundations of modernity allows one to centre the contemporary formations of these systems in the region, and to link this to women's daily realities.

2 The case of Palestine is unique, as it faces settler colonialism that intersects with other forms of colonialism in the region while it embodies settler colonialism's logic of elimination.

3 While decolonial is increasingly used in a dematerialised sense, we use decolonial and anti-colonial interchangeably to denote efforts to dismantle and transform systems of colonial domination.

In doing so, this paper critically interrogates the methodological and epistemological dimensions of existing hegemonic forms of knowledge production on Arab women's struggles and fleshes out what an alternative decolonial feminist methodology might look like. We focus on the specific case of Syrian women and the literature on their realities produced by international organisations as illustrative of forms of knowledge production based on hegemonic liberal feminist epistemologies and methodologies.

While there is a literature which critiques Orientalist-colonialist approaches to analysing Arab (Third world) women, there is a lack of literature that focuses on the methodological and epistemological approaches that uncover how processes of research contribute to the reproduction of orientalist-colonialist perspectives. This paper attempts to consider the possibilities that decolonial feminist methodologies could open-up for exceeding this predicament, thus inviting further reflections on how decolonial feminist methodologies might be applied in scholarship by and on Arab women's struggles against the interconnected formations of patriarchy, war and settler colonialism in the region. We ask: what epistemological and methodological approaches and methods are required and can enable us to produce decolonial feminist knowledge that exposes how the interlocking structure of modern power/coloniality shape women's lived experiences in order to facilitate its transformation? How can decolonial feminist knowledge production also be rethought as a process of collaboration with women who resist these material conditions?

Therefore, our aim is to begin to think through and develop decolonial feminist methodologies that relink the decolonisation of knowledge production to practices that aim at the decolonisation and transformation of material structures of power. We argue that the hegemony of liberal feminist approaches and the methodologies connected with them entail the reproduction of the coloniality of power in the real social world and in the sphere of knowledge production on this social world.

The pitfalls of liberal epistemology and methodology

White liberal feminism, the most familiar and dominant strand of feminism, focuses on the attainment of individual rights and freedoms, and formal equality in legal, political, and social spheres. Arguing that patriarchal structures intrude on women's personal and political choices, liberal feminism calls for extending property rights and political participation to women. Women's individual autonomy and freedom are crucial tenets of liberal feminists. They seek equity and reform in existing political and social institutions. Critics of liberal feminism emphasise that its origin in European, middle class women's worldviews make it irrelevant to the life conditions of women of colour, working class women and third world colonised women, whose concerns are profoundly different from the conceptions of individual autonomy that concern privileged white middle class women. Instead, women of colour, Indigenous and third world feminists focus on the systemic nature of power and the interlocking way power is organised along patriarchal, colonial,

racialised, and classed lines. Furthermore, critics of neoliberal expressions of feminism locate liberal feminist claims for gender equity in market ideologies (Bailey 2016: 696-671).

The liberal feminist epistemological attitude is committed to objectivity, autonomy, and impartiality. According to Alison Jaggar (1983) liberal feminist epistemology maintains binaries, as it strictly differentiates between the body and mind, ideas and emotions, truth and value, and public and private. Liberalism is based on an abstract concept of human nature and focuses on human values and rights, which obscure the real conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed. Liberal feminist approaches have distinct methodological implications; liberal feminist research for social transformation consists of research that focuses on obstacles to and opportunities for women's integration within prevailing social structures. However, this entrenches women's location within the very conditions that perpetrate oppressive social hierarchies. The philosophical ground of liberal feminism constitutes a guiding philosophy in women's organisations such as UN Women, which operates in the Arab region. It is through such institutions that this liberal framework, its methodologies and integrationist approach to social transformation, has become hegemonic. The liberal feminist framework that informs the work of such international organisations is informed by an individualist analytic. The principle of individualism constitutes the pillar of hegemonic liberal epistemology. Despite the differences in liberal perspectives, liberals are bound by an individualist analytic that assumes that the human being – the individual rational agent – perceives the world and its truths while being separated from others. This is linked to methodological individualism, which focuses on individual intentionality as the main causal explanation for the phenomenon in question, and has direct implications for how the social world is interpreted and represented.

Decolonial-feminist methodologies: the need for a structural analysis

Moving, in this section, beyond liberal feminist methodological limitations, we integrate Marxist methodology with decolonial indigenous feminist methodologies. In contrast with most writings on Arab women's conditions, which adopt analytical frameworks that overlook the structural basis of women's oppression, our methodological approach attempts to grasp the visible aspects of domination and oppression while simultaneously exposing the structural nature of these oppressions. This dual process assists researchers and their interlocutors to make sense of their experiences and frustrations under conditions of war and settler colonialism in late capitalism, and lays the ground for formulating a transformative feminist methodological approach to research.

To deepen our understanding of the structural basis of women's oppressive life conditions, we begin with Marx's methodology, which maps out the structural conditions in relation to the underlying and unobserved modes of capitalist accumulation. This point of departure assists us in establishing the ground for empirical analyses of their effects in the historically specific context of Arab women's realities, as analysed through the case of Syrian women in the international reports examined below. We also extend the Marxist analysis of the mode of production to include other

oppressive structures, including settler colonialism, the mode of patriarchal ideology under capitalism, and settler colonialism.

Martha Gimenez (2005) explains the importance of revisiting Marx on the question of methodologies when she argues

> Marx's methodology leads to a conceptualization of the oppression of women as the visible or observable effect (e.g., in the labor market, socio-economic stratification, domestic division of labor, etc.) of underlying structured relations between men and women which are, in turn, an effect of the ways in which capitalist accumulation determines the organization of reproduction among the propertyless, making it contingent on the ability of people to sell their labor (Gimenez 2005: 25).

Marx's methodology helps us to identify the non-observable structures and social relations underlying the visible patterns of interaction between men and women that place the latter in a subordinate position. According to Gimenez, "To grasp the capitalist determinants of the oppression of women it is indispensable to follow Marx's methodology; i.e., his dialectical understanding of abstraction, his critique of the search for origins in isolation from and prior to the analysis of the historically specific structures and relations underlying the phenomena under consideration" (Gimenez 2005: 15).

In doing so, Marxist methodologies offer important ways of going beyond the trappings of methodological individualism, by differentiating between the observable manifestations of women's oppression, such as domestic or public gender violence, and the non-observable structures, namely the situated capitalist modes of accumulation that underlie and drive the visible patterns of interaction between men and women, which place the latter in a subordinate position (Gimenez 2005: 15-17). This means moving beyond individual intentions to recognising the causal powers of unobservable social structures "which are reducible neither to observables nor to their individual components" but which underlie and constitute social behaviour and therefore represent the "conditions of possibility" of the phenomenon in question" (Weldes, 1989: 376, 370).

In starting from the Marxist distinction between the visible formations of oppression and the underlying conditions and structures that produce these realities, we affirm the importance of feminist, critical and indigenous methodologies that critique positivist approaches to knowledge production, and maintain that research should start from a place of political commitment to radical transformation. Unlike the liberal feminist approach, which focuses on removing obstacles to women's access, in these methodologies research exposes how power is socially organised, so that it can then be transformed. Methods are a critical part of this process. Approaching knowledge production from a place of commitment to radical transformation often entails rethinking research as a process of collaboration and co-production that "bring[s] researchers and their research participants into a shared, critical space, a space where the work of resistance, critique, and empowerment can occur" (Denzin, Lincoln and Tuhiwai Smith, 2008: 5). In other words, in searching for methodologies that can capture the complexities of the ways in which Arab

women's daily realities, it is important to combine Marxist methodologies that direct our attention to unobservable social structures with feminist and critical indigenous methodologies that rethink research as a collaborative space in which to engage in the critical apprehension and transformation of reality.

Coloniality of power in the Arab region

'Coloniality', a term formulated by Anibal Quijano, is one element of the model of power that is globally hegemonic today (Quijano 2000: 533). According to Quijano, there are two related axes of power that structure the modern world order: coloniality of power and capitalism. This capitalist system of power is historically anchored in the colonisation of the Americas, and is constituted through processes of racialisation and capitalist exploitation. We want to situate Arab women's social conditions and everyday realities within the colonial-capitalist system of power, as configured in the Arab region in the form of the colonial mode of production, as theorised by Mahdi A'mel, as well as the new face of war that we will consider below.

In the Arab world today, complex assemblages of local, as well as global political and economic systems of domination, structure social conditions and shape women's everyday realities. These forces include the US project of a 'new Middle East,' in which the fragmentation of Arab societies and imperialist wars has led to a resurgence of conservative patriarchal forces. This new (dis)order has become the vehicle for neoliberal restructuring and violent processes of surplus extraction. Ali Kadri (2016) argues that this reflects a broader global matrix of power in which permanent imperialist wars weaken Arab sovereignty and sustain the cheapening of Arab resources "for the purposes of metropolitan capitalist accumulation" (Kadri 2016: 249). Imperialist wars are racialised, gendered and sexualised operations that are organised through military and economic policies (Naber, 2013), which align with broader Western support for regional powers and Zionist settler colonialism's ongoing subjugation of Palestinian land and lives. These regional and global configurations of power, war and violent extraction interact with and (re)shape local patriarchies, the formations of masculinity, heteronormative ideologies, war cultures and class structures.

Coloniality of knowledge production on gender

Coloniality of knowledge production is an extension and reflection of material colonisation, and subsequently justifies and enables the continuation of colonialism. There is a dialogical relation between material colonisation and colonial knowledge production. Hence, decolonisation of knowledge is not possible without the decolonisation of material conditions and social relations. Decolonial feminist methodologies thus should involve a double move– the decolonisation of gendered knowledge production and the decolonisation of material structures of power. Since, as Frantz Fanon argues, decolonisation is a programme to change the order of the world, we need a form of knowledge production that serves this end. Within this view, the role of researcher is to contextualise herself within the struggles of decolonisation in order to be able to produce

decolonial knowledges. Decolonisation should take the gendered dimension of coloniality as a central analytical and political focal point.

While in the 1980s white liberal feminist theory underwent a `post-modern' turn under the influences of post-structuralism, Indigenous, Black and third World feminists never lost sight of a structuralist materialist analysis (Safuta 2016: 19). There is an extensive body of literature by indigenous and women of colour that examine how settler colonialism, capitalism and state apparatuses are gendered and racialised formations and that investigates how these macro systems shape women's micro-lived realities and experiences of gendered and racialised-sexualised violence (Davis 1999; Mohanty 2003; INCITE! 2006; Barker 2017, Kauanui 2018). In this section, we aim to bring Marxist methodologies into conversation with these Indigenous and women of colour feminist perspectives in order to develop a methodological approach that can grasp both the visible aspects of Arab women's oppression and the systems of power that underlie and shape everyday experiences of gendered and racialised violence amid realities of war and dispossession in the Arab region, in ways that decolonise knowledge production in the region and further processes of radical transformation.

In doing so, we draw on Lugones' decolonial feminist analytic, as this framework allows us to extend women of colour's analysis of the intersecting systems of racism, heterosexism and class within the specificities of colonial and imperialist realities in the Arab region. In formulating the "coloniality of gender" Lugones (2010) complicates Quijano's understanding of the capitalist global system of power, and critiques his understanding of gender in terms of contestations over "sexual access" to women as a Eurocentric understanding of gender (Lugones 2010: 745). At the same time, based on and extending women's of colour and third world women's critique of feminist universalism, claiming that the intersection of race, class, sexuality, and gender exceeds the categorial, dichotomous, hierarchical logic central to modern, colonial, capitalist thinking about race, gender, and sexuality (2010: 742), Lugones formulates coloniality of gender as the analysis of racialised, capitalist gender oppression (2010: 747). Coloniality of gender lies at the intersection of gender, class, and race "as central constructs of the capitalist world system of power" (Lugones 2010: 746). As a theorist of resistance, Lugones does not perceive beings as only oppressed and constructed by the coloniality of gender: "instead of thinking of the global, capitalist, colonial system as in every way successful in its destruction of peoples, knowledges, relations and economies", she "thinks of the process as continually resisted, and being resisted today" (2010: 748). For her, resistance constitutes the possibility of political struggle, not its end goal (ibid). She thinks of resistance as the "tension between subjectification (the forming/informing of the subject) and active subjectivity, that minimal sense of agency required for the oppressing—resisting relation being an active one, without appeal to the maximal sense of agency of the modern subject" (ibid). Methodologically, "decolonial feminism" is thought by Lugones

> from and at the grassroots, and from and at the colonial difference… decolonizing gender… is to enact a critique of racialized, colonial, and capitalist heterosexualist gender oppression as a lived transformation of the social… it places the theorizer in the midst of people in a historical

> peopled, subjective/intersubjective understanding of the oppression—resisting relation at the intersection of complex systems of oppression… it must include "learning" peoples (746-747).

Informed by such decolonial feminist methodologies, we not only seek to expose underlying structures that shape Arab women's lives, but seek to reconceptualise the research process. It is imperative to rethink research dialogues with Arab women's daily/lived encounters with everyday conditions of colonial, capitalist, racialised and sexualised violence as the opportunity to co-create new knowledges and practices of resistance together.

One of the main problems one encounters in investigating Arab women's struggles, as evident in the case of Syrian women's everyday experiences of violence and gender-based violence, is that reports produced by international organisations about these realities invariably erase or do not take structural conditions seriously. The plethora of knowledge production by the international agencies that are intervening in Syria and play a hegemonic role in framing Syrian women's conditions, adopt a reductionist conceptual framework. This literature is mired in a methodological individualism that focuses on intentionality and individual motives as being the "locus of explanation" (Weldes, 1989: 356-357). In the extensive reports we examined for this study, this takes one of two forms; it is either manifested in an orientalist conception of culture in which customs are regarded as the determinants of behaviour, or takes the form of a liberal individualist analysis of choice and coping mechanisms. The result is that Syrian women's exposure to gendered violence and systemic exploitation are obscured by an orientalist or liberal feminist analytic that conceal the pervasive ways the structural conditions of war, militarism and economic collapse fissure, contort and reshape social relations and everyday life. What is required, therefore, is to move beyond what is observed at the level of individual intentionality, to the unseen conditions that produce occurrences, or what Jutta Weldes describes as moving from "manifest phenomena to the structures that generate them" (1989: 370). Further, most literature on Syrian women approaches them as passive subjects, overlooking their resistance capabilities.

Capitalism and war in the region

Our aim in this section is to situate Syrian women's struggles in the context of war and mass displacement at the intersection of local and global structures of power. Specifically, we locate contemporary neoliberal global capitalism and capitalist modes of accumulation by dispossession, as the underlying material foundation that organises the field of social relations. We argue that one cannot understand Syrian women's lived realities without grasping the underlying ways neoliberalism intersects with the structures and the conditions of war in Syria, in ways that are inseparable from the ravaging of Syrian society and the violence pervading women's daily lives.

To grasp Syrian women's everyday conditions and struggles amid the realities of war, it is important to begin by outlining the broader regional dynamics and structural conditions that have shaped and served as a precursor to and rehearsal for the devastation of Syria today. In what follows, we will lay emphasis on two regional dynamics: first, the reordering of Western imperialist dominance over the Arab region in the post-Cold war period in which aggressive neoliberal

assaults on Arab economies and societies were facilitated and advanced through war and deliberate disorder. Secondly, and within this framework, we want to draw attention to the growing nexus between capitalism and war, which mutually reinforce one another in ways that further the dispossession of populations.

A number of studies locate the rise of a new post-Cold War global order in the Arab region. Many scholars argue that a new world order was inaugurated by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which brought recalcitrant and resisting Arab nationalist states and economies under the forces of neoliberal capitalism, and led to the re-imposition of western imperialist dominance over the Arab world in the aftermath of the Cold War, as part of broader US global military hegemony (Harvey 2005 and Klein 2007).[4]

Internally within the region, the US war on Iraq set in place new relations, including systemic interplay/interface between war and capitalism. We need to look at these structural conditions more closely in order to understand Syrian women's struggles today.

In her book *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein insightful analysis of the convergence between capitalism and war in the region, has direct implications for Syria. In it, she describes the US war and destruction of Iraq as one of the main sites for what she calls the 'shock doctrine', in which the deliberate infliction of shocks on a population, and the creation of disorder and fear in times of crisis, are used to impose free market policies (2007: 9). This, she argues, has led to the orchestration of "raids on the public sphere," combined with the "treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities" (2007: 6), which include selling off the state and using the displacement of populations to advance corporate profit making.

Moreover, emphasising that war is itself a central site of profit making, associated with new sets of actors, Klein argues that the war on Iraq launched a "new global paradigm" of "for-profit warfare" marked by the rise of private security companies and mercenaries, as well as for-profit relief and reconstruction" (Klein 2007: 13). Directing our attention to the growing convergence between war and profit making, Klein states that "now wars and disaster responses are so fully privatized that they are themselves the new market" (2007: 13).

At the same time, Klein reminds us that the overall objective of this type of disaster capitalism is to subject populations and regions like the Arab world to the full force of neoliberal capitalism, a system she describes as characterised by "huge transfers of public wealth to private hands, often

4 Neoliberalism, as the contemporary phase of globalised capitalism, emerged as a resolution to the crisis of the global economy in the 1970s. The crisis of over-accumulation was resolved with the triumph of neoclassical 'free market' policies that led to the removal of restrictions on capital, resulting in previously barred areas being opened up as sites for profit making. Main characteristics of neoliberalism include the withdrawal of the state and the reduction of its role in regulating the injustices of capital and redistributing resources to people. This has been accompanied by capitalist modes of accumulation through dispossession, as David Harvey argues, whether through the privatising of life resources, the seizing of land and assets from people, or pushing marginalised communities out in the name of 'urban renewal,' thus seizing new areas for profit making on the basis of displacement.

accompanied by exploding debt, an ever widening chasm between the dazzling rich and the disposable poor" (2007: 15).

The disaster capitalism that was furthered through the US invasion of Iraq must be understood as a precursor for the devastation that was unleashed on Syria following the uprising which began in 2011. In this context, there are two issues that we will address in turn: the first is the new face of war in the region, amid the deadly embrace between capitalism and war; and the second is the way this modality of war interacts with patriarchy and gendered political economies of dispossession.

The new face of war

In his well-known article "Necropolitics," Achille Mbembe examines the US war on Iraq as a turning point in contemporary modalities of war (2003: 30-35). Directing our attention to a new array of actors that are now directly involved in wars, from mercenaries, rebels to militias and armed groups, Mbembe maintains that the state no longer has a monopoly over the means of violence and control over a territory in times of war, and its continued after-effects.

New wars such as the US invasion of Iraq and the crisis in Syria today have unleashed armed groups that compete for control over territories and resources and are sustained by modes of extraction, tied to transnational networks which fuel their militarised activities and power, producing what he calls "war machines" (2003: 33), or what we can call 'war economies'. In place of a centralised state that protects the population and regulates the economy, militarised groups take over and develop "highly organized mechanisms of predation, taxing the territories and populations they occupy and drawing on a range of transnational networks and diasporas that provide both material and financial support" (2003: 34).

These realities produce "enclave economies", which have shifted the "old calculus between people and things", creating new spaces of "war and death" (2003: 33). People in these territories become scattered and are subject to the arbitrary power and coercion of these armed groups, each sustained by extractive capacities, and, as he explains, "the extraction and looting of natural resources by war machines goes hand in hand with brutal attempts to immobilize and spatially fix whole categories of people or, paradoxically, to unleash them, to force them to scatter over broad areas no longer contained by the boundaries of a territorial state" (2003: 34). Populations are thus no longer protected by a state, but are confined in camps, or caught between life and death, and these realities are compounded by the "generalization of insecurity" (2003: 34). This reading brings into precise view how capitalism is renewed and operates today on a global scale through processes of violent extraction that produce varying conditions and states of dispossession.

Patriarchy and capitalism

How do we conceptualise and analyse the intersection of these macro structural conditions and the daily lives of women at the micro level? How do the new faces of war, the aggressive neoliberal

restructuring of economies and societies advanced through war, the rise of militarised groups fuelled by the extraction of resources, impact and reshape Syrian women's everyday conditions, patriarchal relations and norms? What feminist research methods are needed and adequate to decipher, decode and analyse these relationships? In an article on the gendered nature of war in Syria, Khuloud Alsaba and Anju Kapilashrami argue that a feminist political economy is an important corrective to gaps in the contemporary analysis of gendered violence of war, which fails to consider "how political economic and social structures "both condition and heighten women's vulnerability to violence" (2016: 7, quoting True 2012). We concur – women's situated lived experiences of patriarchy and gendered violence are inseparable from these broader macro systemic forces of war, militarism and neoliberal economies. How do we make these connections?

Patriarchy, as Himani Bannerji (2016) maintains, is not a self-contained social formation. As she explains, the "power relations of the entire social organization imbue gender relations in production and reproduction involving both property and propriety. Thus, patriarchy is modified and mutated by significant changes in the mode of production" (Bannerji, 2016: 4). Patriarchy develops and takes on specific characteristics and new forms under wider global economic and political systems. In this regard, there are number of relationships and processes that need to be considered.

Firstly, capitalist modes of accumulation and systems of production are organised and legitimated through ideological formations that in turn authorise and embed certain conceptions of masculinities, femininities and racialised orders through which patriarchy is organised. As Bannerji notes, in India the neoliberal economy and the ideological apparatuses of the state, in particular the shift towards a Hindu rightwing ideology and its hyper-patriarchal notion of female purity, developed "dynamically in mutually formative ways" (2016: 5). Which is to say that the economic base becomes reflected in the production of ideologies that govern social and economic relationships along gender, race and class lines.

Secondly, and building on this, capitalist modes of extraction and production that are based on violence and dispossession infuse and reinforce social and patriarchal violence that get played out in public and private spaces through gendered power dynamics and masculine hegemonies enforced over spaces in the context of war, and this in turn is inextricable from new forces and modes of production created in contemporary war and war economies (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016: 7). Neoliberalism's destruction of the state's welfare role and predatory accumulation produce overarching conditions that promote and exacerbate violence, creating what Bannerji describes as a "toxic social environment: extreme poverty, profound dispossession, ethics of acquisition and consumption are enabling factors of all violence, including violence against women" (Bannerji, 2016: 6). Neoliberal capitalism's attempts to covet land, labour and the resources necessary for life turn everything into objects up for grabs. This is mirrored in and informs the way women's bodies become viewed as things that can be seized or violated against their will. The (re)emergence of capitalist modes of accumulation that rely on dispossessing people reflects the colonial origins of capitalism discussed in Marx's notion of so-called primitive accumulation. However, far from being part of the initial phase of capitalism, settler colonial

dispossession of Indigenous peoples forms the ongoing basis through which capitalism is reproduced today (Coulthard 2014). In the Arab region, the violent colonial roots of capitalism are manifest today in different forms, including in the formation of war economies that coerce and subjugate the people in their territories and transforms what Mbembe calls the "calculus between peoples and things," alternating the politics of life and death. This in turn is mediated by racism and the way it "regulates the distribution of death" and makes what Foucault describes as "putting to death" possible (Mbembe 2003: 17). Within these structural conditions, Himani Bannerji argues that the entire field of social relations becomes infused and dominated by hyper-masculine and colonial logics of appropriation, possession, and extraction.

In spaces of neoliberal predation and in war economies, women are inserted into new value chains that redefine the racialised and gendered assignment of worth to female bodies. New values are assigned through networks that commodify, exchange or engage in the trafficking of women's bodies and their labour, i.e. producing new forms of objectification, denigration, and sexualisation of women. Alongside this, women are also designated new symbolic roles and value by the militarised groups that spread across their territory and promote hyper-masculine ideologies and violent modes of extraction. Bannerji captures some of these processes as follows: capitalism, "with its virulent commodity fetishism has increased the fetishism of women's bodies as objects of consumption to the point of sexual cannibalization, speaking not just metaphorically" (2016: 5). Far from being simply individual experiences, these social conditions reflect the way capitalist accumulation and its racialised and gendered formations reshape everyday realities. In the case of Syrian female refugees, these conditions have manifested in extreme forms of precarity and exposure to structural forms of violence, whether through human trafficking and economic duress to heighten exploitation within informal economies. Syrian female refugees find themselves increasingly vulnerable in the face of racialised and sexualised economies that have emerged at the nexus of refugee displacement and state management of "unwanted others" (Canefe 2018: 40-43) in which the racialized and gendered devaluing of life facilitates profit making.

Thirdly, in addition to this, Marxist and feminist scholars point to the way in which the imposition of neoliberal transformations have also resulted in a reconfiguration of the social contract, which in turn must be understood as a gendered process (Keating, Rusmussen and Rishi, 2010). Feminist intellectuals have long detailed how the rolling back of the state has placed a higher burden on women, and they have outlined how the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPS) that were pushed by the IFIs essentially shifted responsibilities for social reproduction onto the backs of poor and working class women in the Third World. Racialised global conditions of increased economic exploitation of the Global South, amid state withdrawal and abandonment, have been associated with growing exploitation and marginalisation of women. At the same time, scholars point to the way micro-credit schemes, which put the onus on the individual to survive on their own in the market, operate according to gendered patriarchal assumptions of "virtuous mothers and entrepreneurs" who are 'wiser' economically, and thus end up disciplining women in

the Third World to bear this burden alone and to conform to neoliberal norms and roles (Keating, Rusmussen and Rishi, 2010: 166).

In the context of the US invasion of Iraq and the current conditions in Syria, how have these global conditions transformed social contracts along gendered lines and in ways that have reshaped patriarchal power relations? What new modes of survival are being imposed on women, not as a choice, but as a form of structurally induced impoverishing of lives as a result of broader conditions in which the state, according to global neoliberal dictates, no longer upholds and enables the lives of its citizens? In Iraq, the withdrawal of state support left over a million widows struggling to maintain their households. Iraq's new neoliberal economic and social order was accompanied by the rise of highly patriarchal ethnic and religious forces that were installed by the US occupation. Tribal and customary male authorities responded to the plight of widows by advocating the use of polygamy as a solution to poverty and single-headed female households.

Cases like this often get taken up as examples of how 'traditions' and customs are the root cause of women's oppression in the Third World, when in fact what we are witnessing is the transformation of the social contract under harsh neoliberal economies and a broader racialised global order, in which states in the Global South increasingly disavow responsibility for citizens' lives. The ideological forces that dialectically develop and work hand in hand with these economies intervene to shape new contracts, and decide how lives will be upheld, and on what terms, in ways that reflect neoliberal's narrow economic logics, its lack of regard for people's well-being, and which in turn are embedded in and through patriarchal relations.

Culture and customs become ideological tools abstract from the material conditions that have propelled a shift in social relations, and infuse the direction of these relations, thus enabling capitalist and patriarchal systems of domination to perpetuate and reproduce themselves, while laying the blame on culture and focusing on the individual level.

The problem is that today, much of the analysis of women's realities of war and colonisation are either often captive to orientalist cultural analysis or a liberal feminist individualist analytic, and each work in different ways to mask and obfuscate structural relations, global capitalism and racialised power dynamics. This does not allow us to see macro systems, and the transformations these systems enact in social relations, which are organised through patriarchy and racism and produce effects on everyday lives, labour, bodies, spaces, and power relations.

International organisations' discourses: Disconnecting/separating Syrian women's lived struggles from structural power and violence

We will now turn to examine some of the ways in which the reports produced by international organisations that are directly intervening in Syria today, frame and conceptualise Syrian women's lived struggles. We examined a wide range of reports produced by international organisations and agencies, including reports by IFIs, UN agencies, and international organisations such as Care International and Amnesty International. We critically examine how these reports understand and

explain Syrian women's economic struggles and their exposure to gender-based violence, the analytics they use, what this makes visible, and what this also elides and conceals.

A close reading of these international reports reveals the absence of a decolonial-feminist framework, and how this in turn limits and distorts our understanding of Syrian women's realities. Without a materialist understanding of the underlying relationship between capitalism and war in its regional and global settings, and its racialised and gendered formations, these reports remain at the surface level of the observable. They cannot see and thus render visible the much deeper structural conditions and transformations that are reshaping Syrian women's daily lives. These reports fail to connect and understand how macro-economic and political structures, such as militarism, racialised and gendered neoliberal economies, and dismantled states, impact women's lives, their experiences of violence, and their economic struggles. Instead, the reports often promote liberal feminist and cultural orientalist analytics that distort more than they reveal, and impose a culturalist or individualist analysis on the realities of dislocation and war.

The result is a problematic analytical framework in which culture becomes the cause of the alarming expansion of gender-based violence, disconnecting this from how patriarchal norms and broader power dynamics have shifted amid factors such as the rise of new militarised forces that restructure masculinity, exert hegemony over space, and control extractive capacities. Similarly, and equally problematically, the gender analysis of women's economic struggles is reduced to liberal individualist conceptions of 'choice' and coping strategies that erase structural power and domination. Violent realities are masked by being discussed in terms of individual coping methods, when in fact there is no choice at all under conditions in which deprivation, degradation, and self-commodification are systemically induced by global racialised power dynamics, neoliberal economies, and states that do not provide for people. Or, as was captured in one of SCPR's reports, these structural conditions produce "Deprivation for all!" (SCPR, Alienation and Violence March 2015a).

Consequently, and in the name of evidence-based research, these reports often incorporate women back into unjust economies that no longer serve people, or mask structural conditions of intersecting power and domination behind static and Orientalist conceptions of culture. This perpetuates systems of domination and masks the fact that what is needed is structural transformations, an alternative economy and political solidarity to end militarism and war, as called for by SCPR and Syrian feminists (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom et al 2017).

Syrian women in international reports

In this section, we offer examples from reports published by international organisations on Syrian women which reflect the limitations of overlooking structural forces that condition Syrian women's realities.

Many reports start from the premise that the capitalist economy is rational and neutral, and ignore the impact of neoliberal transformations on gendered formations. For instance, in a report on work and war, Care International claims that Syrian women's participation in the labour force was very low in pre-war conditions, at 22% in 2010 (Care International 2016: 4). However, feminist political economy perspectives point to the way declining female employment in the pre-uprising period was caused by the introduction of neoliberal policies, and the combined impact of the reduction of subsidies and the commercialisation of agriculture. According to AlSaba and Kapilashrani, neoliberal policies resulted in a significant loss of jobs for Syrian women in agriculture, from 54% to 22% from the 1990s to 2000, and led to a marked decline in female participation in the economy (2016: 8). Care International's use of micro analysis conceals the impact of economic structural reforms introduced by neoliberalism and what this did to women's lives.

Later in the report, it is suggested that Syrian women today "lack vision" and are dependent, because in the past they had limited jobs opportunities (Care International 2016: 5, 23). This not only obscures the impact of neoliberalisation on women, but it distorts our understanding of what is going on, claiming women lack vision, when political economy perspectives suggest a more complex picture of structural exclusion.

Such a liberal analytic that always already sees the capitalist economy as neutral, does not allow one to see the actual transformations that have taken place: it denies the creation of war economies, warlords, and the rise of illicit trade networks that are based on seizing people, often women, to extract profit. Similarly, reports often do not address the state, the implications of state weakness or collapse of its regulative role, and the precarity that ensues when state welfare is no longer a given, or seen as a right or entitlement. This is not to deny the repressive nature of the regime nor to suggest that the Syrian state was an ideal type welfare state by any means; a neoliberal process of restructuring had begun before the war. Our point however is that in these reports conditions of structural coercion or deprivation are reified and reframed as temporary aberrations (rather than a more protracted, long-term reality), or repackaged as individual choices and coping mechanisms.

For instance, the trafficking of women is discussed in passing in reports such as that of the UNFPA, as though it is merely a temporary effect of war. Trafficking of women is decontextualised from the context of neoliberal war, and the rise of more organised illicit network and forced labour practices that thrive in disorder, violence and displacement. This prevents a critical analysis of how trafficking, as Suchland argues, is an economic practice that is linked to and capitalises on "conditions of precarious labor" (2015: 23).

Also, many reports by organisations like Care International, Amnesty International and humanitarian organisations use the term "survival sex" to reframe prostitution as agency and as a coping strategy in the market. This, however, masks the fact that prostitution is not simply a choice but reflects a generalised reality, in which there are few options for women in structural conditions

of surplus labour driven by shattered modes of production, and in economies reoriented around the reproduction of violence.

Similarly, early marriage in explained as either being attributed to Syrian customs in which 'men provide for women', in reports by UNFPA and Amnesty International. Or, early marriage is explained as an individual choice and way of surviving. This liberal analytic does not allow us to see that early marriage is not a resourceful coping strategy but a form of deprivation that takes away from young women; it means the loss of their independence and entails the theft of their early youth. Again, this reflects a lack of life choices, driven by structural conditions of disorder, lack of state welfare, and collapsed economic modes of production, or predatory extraction. Reports cannot explain why, as Care International states, Syrian women "resort to degrading, harmful, or dangerous livelihood coping strategies" (Care International 2016: 16), or why there are scarce jobs.

Without an economy that is organised in a way that provides dignified jobs and a state that supports citizens, there are few choices for people, and women in particular. These conditions impose degrading lifestyles and exploitative labour practices on people; liberal notions of individual agency mask these structural realities. These international reports prevent us from seeing structural conditions of domination that need to be transformed, and do not allow us to see that there is a need for alternative economies to overturn the effects of war and of neoliberalism for women, and Syrians as a whole.

Alternative frames

In contrast to the reports of the organisations linked to the aid regime, the Syrian Center for Policy and Research (SCPR) is one of the only organisations that makes visible the material transformations that have taken place in the Syrian economy. In a 2015 report, SCPR describes the structural realities of the Syrian economy as follows: the war "has largely destroyed the economic structure, foundations, and institutions," main economic sectors have "been shattered," and the economy has been fragmented under the decentralized power and control of armed forces (Confronting Fragmentation, 2015b: 38-39). They also point to the absence of regulative frameworks and rule of law.

In contrast to the false image of a unified rational market projected by international reports, SCPR emphasises that the main sector that is surging is "violence, which restructured the economy based on its related activities" (2015b: 36). In doing so, SCPR focuses on the extractive power and coercive forces of armed groups, which engage in illegal trade, smuggling, weapons trade and human trafficking.

Thus, SCPR paints a very different picture to that of the international reports, concluding that the war in Syria has led to the rise of "new actors" or shifted the behaviour of "previous actors" to that of new rules, whereby these actors (armed) are engaged in "imposing hegemony by force and building up new political economics to sustain the conflict" (2015b: 38). These actors fight over

resources, create violence-related jobs, leave populations insecure, and impose their rules by force (2015b: 38). The result, as SCPR states, is a new economy and new market forces that are "being built upon the alienation and estrangement of citizens and society" (SCPR, 2015a: 36).

It is only in relation to these complex material realities and overarching macro structural transformations that we can begin to understand Syrian women's struggles at the micro everyday level, and make sense of women's economic struggles and their increasing exposure to pervasive violence and forms of gendered and sexualised violence.

It is only by recognising this new political economy, and the role of new decentralised forces and armed groups in creating an economy that not only does not serve people but actively participates in their dispossession, that we can map the multiple shifts and transformations in women's everyday lives, the (re)shaping of patriarchal norms, power relations, new control over bodies and spaces, degrading labour practices and living conditions.

SCPR emphasised that, in 2014, 17% of the active population inside Syria was involved in illegal economic trade and activities (2015b: 37). Care International similarly cites that 17% of households they surveyed, and 23% of internally displaced individuals, said they rely economically on armed groups. Such numbers reveal the new economic structural realities of war. However, such figures and statistics are mentioned and then ignored in reports by organisations such as Care (2016: 18).

These material transformations have direct implications for social relations. The rise of hyper-masculine armed groups, trained, funded and supported by various regional and global forces, are now controlling resources, and families are dependent on them for survival. It is crucial to consider what all of this means at the level of ideologies, gender norms and patriarchal power dynamics. Shifts in gender norms, control over women's bodies and sexualities, so-called 'honour crimes' - the killing of women -cannot be separated from these new actors and the hyper-patriarchal ideologies that have been territorialized on bodies and spaces and are linked to shifting conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

The reflections we offer in this paper intersect with some of the views articulated by *Women Now for Development* in the paper "Gender Justice and Feminist Knowledge Production in Syria." In it, they also recognise that "patriarchal social norms are inextricably influenced and shaped by other types of social and political power relations such as class, ethnicity" (2019: 9). They also point to the need for a structural analysis of the conditions that shape women's lives when they state that "patriarchal violence is shaped and strengthened by different types of social domination and power" (2019: 9). The question, however, becomes: how can these epistemological shifts be reflected in the field research conducted in order to understand the lived experiences of Syrian women?

Methods and transformative research: Towards decolonial feminist knowledge production

What methods and fieldwork approaches are adequate to the task of understanding the macro-systemic forces and relations behind the phenomena that shape women's everyday realities at the micro-level in ways that facilitate decolonial feminist consciousness and knowledge production?

This, we contend, is a process fraught with tensions, and there is a need for critical self-reflexivity as one searches for ways to transcend limitations, in which one remains caught within the veneer of the observable. Most methods, such as interviews and ethnographies, that are practised according to methodological individualism, tend "only to grasp the 'phenomenal forms of everyday life' without apprehending the "inner relations, causal processes and generative mechanisms which are often invisible to actors'" (Sharp quoted in Jordan and Yeomans, 1995: 396).

We want to emphasise that interviews and ethnographies are not about 'voices' and simply retrieving and listening to women's stories. We conceptualise interviews as an encounter between theory, lived bodily experiences of systems of power, and individuals' everyday consciousness. Neither is the researcher the all-knowing producer of knowledge, nor is the interlocuter an object of knowledge, or a romanticised 'authentic voice' that has all the answers.

Interviews and ethnographies are a meeting of decolonial feminist theory and lived experiences and resistance practices. Space needs to be given for interplay and a dialogical exchange between theory, lived encounters with power, and commonsense consciousness and critiques of conditions of oppression. Herein, in this exchange, lies the unexpected potentiality for new transformative understandings of power, oppression and resistance that serve as the basis for insurgent transformative knowledge production.

In this respect, the theoretical point of departure of the researcher is crucial. The researcher needs to come equipped with a decolonial feminist understanding of the overarching material structures of power, their logics, and how these seek to regulate subjectivities, and govern in gendered and racialised ways, in line with the objectives of the macro-systems.

Ethnographies provide rich details of the textures of women's everyday lives that offer new and fresh insights into how these complex relations and unseen structures of power imprint themselves and are inscribed on women's lives, bodies, and consciousness.

In this encounter between theoretical feminist analysis and women's everyday encounters with structures of power, lie unforeseen and often unexpected opportunities to 'break to remake' conventional assumptions and co-create new understandings of how often unseen systems shape the conditions that mould and fracture everyday women's lives and relations.

Ethnographies provide space for rich interpretive processes; they create possibilities for researcher and interlocutor to develop new understandings of both conditions of oppression and

the ways women carve spaces in opposition to the goals and all-encompassing designs of prevailing systems. Statements like 'I am not living' are points of departure for theorizing realities of oppression when life and death become indistinguishable. Also, ethnographies reveal the ways in which women refuse to be called into place by regimes and ideologies, and carve out oppositional spaces and possibilities for alternatives to what is deemed 'what is', by the ruling systems of oppression.

The overall aim, as articulated by Jordan and Yeomans, is not providing expert knowledge; rather, "the role of the critical ethnographer should be oriented to facilitating the production and dissemination of really useful knowledge within the research site." This means, "we must aim to learn and impart skills which will allow our subjects to continue investigating the world in which they will go on living" (1995: 401).

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