Feminist International Political Economy in Europe

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Abstract This chapter reviews the contributions feminist scholars situated in Europe have made to international political economy. It discusses three main areas of influence in the form of critique of capitalism and neoliberalism; debates on international development discourses, governance, and programming; and the conceptual connections established between macroeconomic decision-making and gendered everyday experiences. It also highlights the limits of the scholarship in the form of the hegemony of English language production, the limits brought by the unique positionality of being situated in the European continent, and the restrictions in the dialogue with the broader IPE field.

Keywords Neoliberalism · Development · International governance · Care labor · Social reproductive work

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INTRODUCTION

Feminist international political economy (IPE) is an interdisciplinary field, whose central premise is that political economic structures and discourses constitute, reproduce, and/or change gender norms, relations, and inequalities in a multilayered manner (Bedford and Rai 2010). Feminist IPE unearths gender dynamics and gender inequalities that other IPE scholarship has largely neglected, in the infrastructure of markets and economies and the organization of labor and development practices. Particularly, feminist IPE forcefully connects these macro-structures to gendered everyday experiences. This critical scholarship shows to us that there is absolutely no opting out of a gender analysis if one wants to understand the institutions and lived experiences of international political economy.

This chapter maps the contributions feminist scholars in Europe have made to IPE scholarship, focusing on three distinct themes in the recent decades. I first discuss critical interventions in debates on capitalism and neoliberalism. I show that European feminist IPE has made a significant contribution in connecting the use of gendered discourses, which naturalize women's roles in the economy and the household, to neoliberal policy-making and institutional transformations. Second, I focus on international development. I show that feminist scholarship identifies the ways in which development discourses and programs can contribute to the problems of gender inequality they are purportedly designed to alleviate. In both sections, I also explore the connections built between macroeconomic decision-making processes and everyday experiences. Feminist scholars in Europe are distinctly important in interrogating everyday social reproductive labor and centralizing it in conceptualizing the economy. Third, I explore the contributions feminist IPE scholars have made to understanding the encounters between feminist scholars, gender experts, and political economic governance. I show that feminist IPE has had crucial policy impact, shaping the very institutions and practices they study.

In this chapter, I draw on the work of scholars located in continental Europe, the larger Eurozone and the UK. I do not limit the discussion to scholars in political science and international relations programs but draw out the field's empirical and theoretical richness by canvassing scholars in a variety of disciplines. It has to be emphasized that this chapter embodies a tension between the idea of Europe as a location from where a scholar

is writing and a theorized site with distinct patterns of scholarly production. While it is difficult to resolve this tension here, I propose to use it to reflect on positionalities within global power relations surrounding academic knowledge production.

For this reason, first, a note is necessary on how I attempted to map this diverse and vast scholarship. Starting from the main discussions I knew, I then branched out from them using three interrelated techniques: tracing the citations in these debates, canvassing journals and publishing houses central to feminist IPE, and researching the websites of a number of institutional settings to identify clusters. The chapter, however, is confined to discussions primarily taking place in English. This reflects both my own linguistic skills and the hegemony of the English language in feminist IPE. Second, this limitation suggests possible new research, among other directions, those that are more attuned to theorizations emerging in non-English speaking settings. Furthermore, a truly transnational feminist political economy, I propose, can consider more boldly the various connections between neoliberalism and neoconservatism. This way, debates of cultural diversity can move beyond a simple acknowledging of the “non-West” and interrogate the ways in which harsh political economic policies and practices reproducing and deepening gender inequality can be naturalized under the cloak of cultural difference in any context.

CAPITALISM AND NEOLIBERALISM: CONNECTING DISCOURSES, POLICIES, AND EVERYDAY IMPLICATIONS

One area of strength for feminist IPE in Europe is the links scholars unearth between gendered discourses and massive neoliberal restructuring of economic systems in finance, trade, and labor markets.

In finance, Young (2018) has identified the masculinist biases inherent in monetary policy-making, a process hidden through a technocratic language. Roberts (2015a, 2016) has conceptualized “transnational business feminism” as the use of the feminist lexicon by transnational corporations and international financial institutions while actually bending their meaning in ways that entrench gender inequality. She has examined how this discourse limits the definition of empowerment to access to finance and traces the hypervisibility of a restricted group of women in corporate management while intersectional inequalities fueled by capitalist market economies are erased (Roberts 2015b).

Relevantly, scholars have identified how gendered discourses that have sprung up since the 2007–2008 financial crisis, explain away the causes solely in terms of the absence of women from decision-making positions in finance. Prügl (2012) has written on the myth-making power of the idea of “Lehman Sisters” and the associated argument that the finance giant that would not have gone bankrupt had there been enough women in management. Elias (2012) has written on discourses of “Davos woman,” saving men and capitalism from themselves. Scholars have argued that these discourses produce essentialist notions of femininity and masculinity, naturalizing the unequal organization of social life. Van Staveren (2014) has shown how this binary and essentialist understanding of economic behavior is empirically wrong. Similarly, even though trade specialists assert that trade is gender neutral and purely a technical matter, this discourse itself erases gender inequalities and disguises the impact of trade policies on existing gender inequalities (van Staveren 2003; Barrientos 2019). This group of studies exposes the gendered assumptions and tacit gendered content of macroeconomic policy-making (Elson and Çağatay 2000).

Feminist economists have identified a comparable problem in mainstream discourses on women’s labor force participation. The expansion of the reach of multinational companies since the 1980s increased opportunities for paid jobs outside of home, allowing some women to open spaces of empowerment. However, as Elson argued early on, most jobs most women could access were low-paid and informalized (Elson 1998). Several important names have noted the feminization of global employment patterns and exploitative and precarious jobs for women and men in global factories, the service sector and global care labor (Chant 1998; Morini 2007). Focusing on women’s employment in global factories, Elson and Pearson (1981a, b) argued that multinational corporations turned to women because they were expected to be more docile. Various case studies have revealed that this docility is not a cultural given or an essential feature of femininity, but rather a set of norms and behaviors produced and enforced through state, corporate, and factory regimes as well as labor market conditions (Elias 2004, 2005; Kılınçarslan and Altan-Olcay 2019; McDowell 2009; Ruwanpura and Hughes 2016). In fact, very early on Sylvia Chant’s work clearly showed the diversity of women’s agencies in the Third World (Chant and Brydon 1993; Chant 1997).

Connecting these discursive productions to everyday implications, feminist scholars in Europe have asserted that women’s increased labor

force participation has not meant a fairer redistribution of social provisioning and reproduction. In fact, under the austerity conditions created by the Washington Consensus, women have been stuck with a double burden and time poverty (Elson 1998; Hoskyns and Rai 2007; İlkaracan 2012a; Moser 1992). Some of the most forceful contributions of feminist IPE interrogate the relationship between welfare state structures and gender norms, household compositions, and gendered employment patterns across Europe (Buğra 2018, 2020; Daly 2012a, 2013, 2015; Daly and Ferragina 2018; Daly and Lewis 2000; Karamessini 2008, 2009; Lewis 1992, 2001; Lewis and Giullari 2005; Sainsbury 1996). Caroline Moser's work early on revealed that, when government expenditure on social provisioning shrinks, household consumption patterns are maintained largely due to the overburdening of women in both unpaid care labor and paid labor outside the home (Moser 1989, 1993). Mary Daly has shown how welfare structures can play enormous roles in naturalizing, invisibilizing, or changing the gendered distribution of care labor (2011, 2012b). Ayşe Buğra has drawn attention to how state social policies can draw women into a flexibilized labor market while also consolidating 'state familism,' whereby women are expected to undertake care labor at home (Buğra 2018, 2020). Maria Karamessini has identified a distinct southern European welfare state (2008). Scholars have empirically explored the role the state plays in achieving or barring gender equality in formal employment (Alnaçık et al. 2017; Buğra and Yakut-Çakar 2010; İlkaracan 2012b; Molyneux 2002, 2006; Perrons 1995; Rubery 2002, Rubery et al. 2005). Moving beyond the boundedness of the nation-state, Nicola Yeates has underscored the need to understand the state's role in organizing the distribution of care at the national *and* transnational levels (Yeates 2004). To that end, several case studies connect the gendered, racialized, and ethnicized experiences of migration and care labor to both national governance logics and transnationalization of social reproductive labor (Elias 2010; Kofman and Raghuram 2015; Kunz 2010; McDowell 2013; Sainsbury 2012; Toksöz 2020).

This body of work drives home the point that market economies do not involve automatic transmission mechanisms but rather the myriad, gendered work, and survival strategies undertaken in the everyday make markets survive (Elias and Roberts 2016; Rai et al. 2014). Feminist scholarship argues that this everyday work of social reproduction and community survival should be central to our definitions of economy,

work, and productivity (Harcourt 2014; İlkkaracan 2017; Perrons 2005). Thus, a second important contribution of feminist scholars in Europe is their interrogation of everyday social reproductive labor and its stark invisibilization in both policy-making *and* mainstream and even non-feminist critical IPE (Bedford and Rai 2010; Rai et al. 2014; Steans and Tepe 2010).

Elias and Rai (2019) have recently proposed a broad paradigm shift: the need to discuss capitalism in terms of the structuration of spaces, temporalities, and violences in everyday experience, broadly, and social reproduction, specifically. Social reproductive labor is a site of struggle that can reproduce or challenge how economies are organized, priorities are identified, and policies are shaped (Elson 1998; Elias and Rai 2019). Analytically, by centralizing social reproduction in their studies, scholars make visible the gendered impacts of economic crises; conceptualize and problematize a very real crisis of depletion; and ultimately tie exercises of agency and/or resistance to macro-level political economic arrangements (Elias and Roberts; Kantola and Lombardo 2017; Karamessini and Rubery 2014; Rai et al. 2014; Ruwanpura 2013).

ANALYZING INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSES AND ORGANIZATIONS

Discourses, policies, and practices governing economic processes travel across borders. They become transnationally recognizable while also fracturing along the way (Lombardo et al. 2009). International development and the myriad turns that its logic has taken over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have therefore been another fruitful area of engagement for feminist IPE scholars in Europe.

It was Boserup's pathbreaking *Women's Role in Economic Development* that initially drew attention to the fallacy of assuming that modernization and development benefit men and women in the same way (Boserup 1970). Her work inspired the Women-in-Development (WID) paradigm, highlighting how international development programs often ended up deepening gender inequality in access to economic resources. While WID became an important venue of feminist intervention in the development literature as well as policy-making, its limitations also found voice in the work of feminist IPE scholars in Europe. Naila Kabeer criticized WID's individualist approach for ignoring unequal structural circumstances (1994). She proposed a conceptualization of empowerment that

emphasizes the process through which women's ability to make choices increases as they acquire economic, social, and political resources *and* the policies shaping the structural constraints women face (Kabeer 1999, 2011). Andrea Cornwall (2016) has documented the diverse and unequal paths that women individually and collectively travel to that end. Maria Mies (1988) contested the logic of international development altogether, arguing that capitalism in the Global North depended on the continuous exploitation of the South and the Third World women. Elson (1995) drew attention to the patriarchal structures of international development organizations and the logics they produced. This attention to structure was also present in the works of Molyneux (1985) and Moser (1993), who distinguished between immediate and longer-term transformations needed to achieve gender equality. These feminist IPE giants from Europe were instrumental in the shift from WID to gender and development (GAD), which emphasizes the entanglement of the social construction of gender roles, relations and norms, and the development paradigm.

While GAD is now part of the lexicon of international governance, feminist scholarship continues to debate what GAD has come to mean. They have criticized the essentialization of women's social reproductive roles within heterosexual families (Rai 2002; Molyneux 2006). Much has been written on the World Bank's invention of "smart economics," the logic that investing in women is a smart choice because it can reduce household poverty, improve family well-being, and achieve macroeconomic growth. European feminist scholars have shown that this instrumentalist approach tasks women for achieving macroeconomic growth and poverty reduction, instead of treating the issue of gender equality as a goal in and of itself (Bedford 2009a; Calkin 2012; Chant and Sweetman 2012; Eyben and Napier-Moore 2009; Razavi 2012; Roberts and Soederberg 2012). Feminist scholarship shows that these instrumentalist discourses and essentialist logics invisibilize the unequal distribution of social reproductive labor and obfuscate analysis of structural problems of capitalism and neoliberalism (Bedford 2009a, b; Calkin 2015; Chant 2012; Cornwall and Brock 2005; Cornwall et al. 2007a; Elson 2010, 2012; Ferguson 2010a, b; Kunz 2008, 2012, 2018; Prügl 2009; Razavi 2012).

Feminist scholars have also connected these discourses to their operationalization on the ground. Accordingly, the programs designed with these logics both assume and constitute neoliberal subjectivities, with women expected to be rational, market savvy while still practicing

prudence and care (Altan-Olcay 2014; Madhok and Rai 2013; Rai and Waylen 2008). They also show how programs, targeting women's empowerment in this manner, actually end up naturalizing gendered divisions of social reproduction and notions of heterosexual families and households (Bedford 2009a; Ferguson 2010b). Studies have also paid attention to contradictions between the reality of everyday program work and what the reports say is achieved (Altan-Olcay 2016; Bedford 2009a; Ferguson 2010a). These empirical studies show that neither neoliberalism nor international development discourses are homogenized. They illustrate the cracks, alternatives, and resistances that are born in the everyday (Eschle and Maiguashca 2018; Gregoratti 2016).

REFLEXIVE EXERCISES ON THE GOVERNANCE OF NEOLIBERALISM AND DEVELOPMENT AND FEMINISTS

Interestingly, these important feminist scholarly interventions have built up to a point of recognition in that there are changes in the way gender equality is conceptualized and care labor is made visible in the UN as well as Bretton Woods institutions (Bedford 2009a; Ferguson and Harman 2015). These can also be attributed to the history of feminist involvement with international institutions since the 1990s.

Reflexive feminist writing has long discussed the implications of feminist advocates joining state bureaucracies and international organizations (Rai 2004). Scholars in Europe have also been central in these debates given their experiences with the European Union and the abundance of international governance institutions across Europe. Recent work has challenged the binary discussion of co-optation versus resistance mechanisms (Cornwall et al. 2007b; Rai and Waylen 2008; Çağlar et al. 2013; Chappell and MacKay 2021). These studies underline the need to study the unstable boundaries between institutions and movements (Calkin 2015; de Jong 2016; Eschle and Maiguashca 2007; Sandler and Rao 2012; de Jong and Kimm 2017). They call for listening to the experiences of gender experts and unearthing micropolitical encounters (Altan-Olcay 2020; De Jong 2017; Eschle and Maiguashca 2007; Prügl 2012). Scholars who have worked with international institutions are an integral part of this shift, discussing their own experiences within international governance (Eyben 2010, 2012; Ferguson 2015; Harcourt 2006, 2009; Moser 2005; Miller and Razavi 1998; Razavi 2017).

These accounts open a fascinating venue for exploring the everyday contradictions in institutional life. They shed light on the connections between institutional decision-making, governance of economies, and possibilities for change and resistance (Eyben 2012; Ferguson 2015; Waylen 2017). This scholarship, mostly produced in Europe, thus contributes to an important multilayered analysis that reconceptualizes feminism *and* neoliberalism's multiple and ambiguous trajectories by paying attention to what happens inside the institutions (Eschle and Maiguashca 2018).

INSTITUTIONAL LOCATIONS, POSITIONALITIES, AND NEW DIRECTIONS

When the history of feminist IPE in Europe is interrogated, the impact of scholars from a few institutional locations in the UK becomes noticeable. These locations, such as the University of Manchester, London School of Economics, SOAS of London University, and Institute of Development Studies in Sussex and Warwick, have become meeting grounds for feminist IPE, with scholars spread across a variety of disciplines. Although such clusters are rarer, the same interdisciplinary pattern can be found in continental Europe. Feminist IPE scholars work in departments as diverse as political science, economics, anthropology, geography, and sociology and centers specializing in development studies, gender studies, social policy, and so on. The physical proximity of these universities means that many of these scholars circulate and meet in annual conferences like EISA and ECPG and collaborate in research and writing. It is likely that these exchanges play a role in the coherence of contributions in critical analyses of neoliberal discourses, the complexity of governance structures, and their two-way implications for everyday life and social reproduction.

It is also important to consider this situatedness when thinking briefly about how and in which areas feminist IPE in Europe can make more forceful contributions. Amidst all these connections and interdisciplinary exchanges I have attempted to map, there is a hegemonic position of the English language as the medium of writing. In fact, the coverage of this very chapter suffers from this limitation. The barriers that those who don't write in English face in reaching and becoming part of these seemingly transnational, but in fact linguistically limited discussions should be a point in reflexive thinking about how to expand feminist IPE research.

From a relevant vantage point, we can consider the distinct positionalities of writing from Europe. Feminist IPE in Europe problematizes the dominance of gender logics emanating from the Global North and the West. This reflexivity is important and welcome. However, there is also an occasional silence that results from this reflexivity when discussing agencies and norms in the so-called non-West. This silence often stems from assumptions that occasionally equate neoliberalism with liberalism and then shun liberalism as a Western ideology. Such a generalization can create the analytical and political problem of labeling those actors outside of Europe and North America, who seek the rights associated with liberal democratic states, as compradors and/or not authentic representatives of Eastern agencies (Altan-Olcay 2015, 2021). Furthermore, this approach leaves less room for discussing how neoliberal state policies coupled with conservative ideologies threaten the hard-won achievements of women's rights and gender equality around the world. While it is undoubtedly important to problematize the limits of law and/or homogenizing notions of agency on which they may be based, their loss, reversibility, and/or absence also need to be documented. When discussing diverse agencies in everyday life, I believe that the interdisciplinary nature of feminist IPE has much to contribute, not stopping at binaries, such as "the West" and the rest, "Western norms" and norms elsewhere. One forceful example comes to mind, to this end: Ayşe Buğra discusses how neoliberalism and hegemonizing conservative discourses can mutually support one another, increasingly based on arguments of cultural difference in the case of Turkey (Buğra, 2014). When hegemonic definitions of cultural difference are taken for granted, policy solutions also end up reproducing the problem of gender inequality (Buğra 2014, 2020, Buğra and Yakut-Çakar 2010).

A final area to think about is the inroads feminist IPE can make in political economy scholarship broadly. While the issues raised by feminist IPE remain more crucial than ever, feminist scholarship continues to remain tangential to mainstream and other critical political economy scholarship (Bedford and Rai 2010; Elias 2011; Elias and Roberts 2016). This is a question that concerns feminist scholarship in general. However, the interdisciplinary nature of political economy and the European context, where disciplinary boundaries are more fluid and critical social sciences approaches are more common in university departments than in North America, makes this specific field a fertile place to start these discussions. This would be an exercise in strategizing, one that leads to breaking down intra-disciplinary boundaries.

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