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***DISCOURSE OF GENDER IN NEOLIBERAL POLITICS***

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*Abstract: This paper would critically dissect how and why neoliberal discourses are gendered (but also sexually configured) through historically and diverse specific conventions and rules, how gender is made intelligible in order to better serve neoliberal ideals of marketisation, privatisation, deregulation and flexibilisation. The study would apply a "gender lens" to the analysis of political processes and by deploying the insights gained from feminist theory. Also, it provides a gendered account of the ways in which liberal rights, and ideas of democracy and justice, have been absorbed into the political agendas of women's movements and states.*

*The issue of gender has a salient place in neoliberal world and is one of the most salient social cleavages (a factor that divides society). It indicates the vast range of cultural meaning attached to that basic difference. It might also play a fundamental role in social hierarchies, explaining why some people enjoy greater status or respect than others. Like all theoretical tools and discourses, the theory of gender is always interpreted by persons within particular social contexts and with particular orientations in the social world.*

*The issue of gender is automatically a political issue because it involves the unequal distribution of resources between the two genders, arising out of male domination of the political system which allows men to allocate to women the heavier burden of labour and the more menial tasks, but to men more leisure and the larger share of rewards and benefits. Gender is not something that is inside a pre-existent essence, waiting to find bodily expression. There is no inner truth, awaiting authentic or proper realization in bodily or material acts. In the context of increasing hegemony of neoliberal ideology, states are shrinking their developmental budgets, seeking new ways to economize and gender policies are of course implicated of these changes. How does gender affect political understanding?*

**Keywords:** *Neoliberal, Gender-blind, marketisation, development, Feminism*

### **1. Conceptualisation of Gender**

Gender is a fluid, flexible and a contested concept. It is a large theme as well as a multilevel phenomenon. Its effects can be seen at all levels of social life. In the last three decades many diverse strands of scholarly inquisition have converged to produce a more complex understanding of gender as a cultural phenomenon. The term used to be seen as the "psychological, social, and cultural aspects of maleness and femaleness" (Kessler and McKenna 1978:7). As Judith Howard and Jocelyn Hollander argue, "gender is a slippery term" (1997: 10); for Harriet Bradley "gender is a very diffusive and all-embracing concept" (2007: 5). D. Glover and K. Kaplan aptly put it, "a busy term" (2000: ix), meaning that it is widely used, in many differing contexts. Part of the "slipperiness" and "busyness" arises from the fact that this is a highly politically charged concept (Bradley 2007). In fact, as Joan Acker notes, "although the term [gender] is widely used, there is no common understanding of its meaning, even among feminist scholars (1992: 565)". It is seen, not as structurally determined, but as the outcome of women's and men's actions under historically specific conditions. The concept of gender is already lived experience, gestural, corporeal, and cultural mediated and historically constituted (Chanter 2006). As Iris Marion Young concluded in her

essay “Modernity, Emancipatory Values, and Power,” “Gender is . . . a set of ideational and social structural relationships that people move through, rather than attributes they have attached to their persons” (2005: 493).

The multiplicity of views and perspective of gender does not have to result in disorder and disarray. The field’s conceptual and theoretical diversity can be a source of enrichment rather than fragmentation.

It is a way of explaining as well as describing social relations. It denotes disparate and mainly hierarchical divisions between men and women, which is embedded in social institutions and practices. On the international stage, it is everywhere (Meade and Wiesner-Hanks 2004). The focus of gender as implicated with sexual differences allows for an understanding of the political and social aspects of sex, rather than seeing sex and gender as separate and distinct (Woodward 201).

In the 19th century, James Stephen and John Stuart Mill wrote influential essays on the question of equality that found a place in the standard of classic texts of political thought. Their essays assist us to comprehend the issue from the point of view of thinkers who either ignored women or expected women to be subsumed within the collective identity of men. Today the study of gender entails us to solicit how women concerned with political life understood the question of equality and to see the discussion of the question as incomplete until their perspectives are considered (Conway, et al. 1987).

The concept of gender as it is used in the social science thinking contemporary era is relatively new. The word has a much longer history, while the academic use of the term is largely a creation of the Women’s Studies Movement of the 1970s and 1980s. D. Glover and K. Kaplan (2000) argued that the term gender was first employed in the 1960s in the then growing area of psychology and sexology of sex. One book that sprang from this tradition, psychologist Robert Stoller’s *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (1968), is cited by them as the first study to formulate fully the distinction between gender and sex that was commonly used by the feminist scholars of the 1970s.

One perspective of gender, which is not the sociological perspective, is that gender is somehow essential to being male/female, i.e. gender is both static and innate. In this view, gender refers to characteristics of the individual person, assumed to be biological in origin. The perspective is known as the “essentialist perspective”. This account of gender as it rests on the assumption that there is an ‘essence’ of man/woman that determines behaviour in spite of socialisation (Shepherd 2010). Although some fewer theorists supported this viewpoint at the end of the 20th century, sometimes the underlying assumptions of social-Psychological research are consistent with this notion (Vannoy 2001).

While the language of sex and gender was not developed until the 1960s, one could map the distinction between sex and gender onto some of the developments that preceded it. The pioneering French Feminist Simone de Beauvoir (1949), famously claimed in her seminal study *The Second Sex*, “Women are made, they are not born”. People construct themselves as masculine or feminine. This proclamation was challenging traditional patriarchal beliefs by differentiating between the two spheres that would later be labelled sex and gender. The distinction and the idea itself that “man” and “woman” are more social creations than biological creatures were salient in the development both of feminist understanding of

women's oppression and political strategies for change (Edwards 1989). Feminism is especially concerned to challenge one of the crucial elements of modernism: the anthropocentric definition of knowledge (Hekman 1990).

## 2. Gender Discourse after Second Wave of Feminism

In the 1960s the study of gender shifted to an importance on socialisation rather than biology. Feminists of the "second-wave" took up the debate about biology by distinguishing between biological sex and social and cultural gender. The number of theorists proposed a sharp division between "gender" and "sex". Sex refers to the biological apparatus, the difference between the male and the female human animal – our chromosomal, anatomical and chemical organisation. Gender was the social fact, the difference between masculine and feminine roles, or men's and women's personalities (Connell 2002: 33). "Gender" is masculinity and femininity and "sex" is male and female, what it means to be a man or a woman.

By gendered, one understands the division of people into two differentiated groups, 'men' and 'women' and the organization of the major aspects of society along those binaries. Gender is a social construct, a product of culture, not nature. Its differences are typically imposed through contrasting stereotypes of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'.

Gender divisions not only infuse the individual's sense of self, intimate relationships and families, but also structure work, law, politics, medicine, education, the military, religions, and culture. It is a system of power in that it privileges some men and disadvantages most women. It is constructed and maintained by both the dominants and the oppressed because both ascribe to its values in personality and identity formation and in appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour. Gender is hegemonic in that many of its foundational assumptions and ubiquitous processes are invisible, unquestioned, and unexamined (Davis et al. 2006). This distinction was considered a conceptual breakthrough. The variability of gender, as opposed to what Ann Oakley identified as the 'constancy' of sex, is what made gender so central to the feminist program.

The term gender is not simply a system of classification, by which biological males and females are separated, sorted, and socialised into equal sex roles. It also expresses the universal inequality between men and women. When we speak about gender we also speak about hierarchy, power, and inequality, not simply difference (Kimmel 2011).

The British feminist and sociologist Ann Oakley (1972) saliently pointed out how different societies define femininity and masculinity in different and opposite ways and she also discusses how far observable differences are based on psychology and biology and how far on cultural conditioning. Oakley's work was salient in pointing out how the apparent certainty of sex had been used to shape a social category – gender – which was subject to change. She argued that sex might be anatomical and corporeal but gender, that is, masculinity and femininity, were cultural and thus fluid and could be changed and reconstructed.

The relation between sex and gender has been construed as necessary by the tradition of patriarchy. To say that sex and gender are necessarily related to one another is to say that one causes or determines the other. Nature or sex is causally determinative of gender (Chanter 2006: 16). The basic idea here is Sigmund Freud's most famous line 'Anatomy is Destiny'. A

large number of people believe that the differences in male and female anatomy are decisive and provide the basis for the differences in men's and women's experiences.

An American radical and feminist philosopher Mary Daly, in *Gy/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, developed new ways of critiquing and challenging male dominance or what she called "male stream thought". The sex/gender division was vital to many early feminist studies throughout the 1980s. A valuable outline of this approach comes from the historian Joan Scott, "gender is a social category imposed on sexed body" (1988: 18). However, she noted, this division between biological sex and socio-cultural gender has been increasingly contested. Once again, this contestation could be seen to arise from the politics of sexuality and gender. One of the first challenges to arise from the problems of the sex-gender binary came from that of biologist Lynda Birke (1986), who argued that sex and biology were not themselves static and fixed categories. It was not only gender that was socially shaped, but the human bodies change in interaction with the social environment.

At one end of the spectrum there are those whose explanations of the subordination of women focus primarily on the biological difference as causal in the construction of gender (Susan 1978) and at the other end there are those who argue that biological difference may not even lie at the core of the social construction that is gender (Collier and Yanagisako 1992); the views of the vast majority of feminists fall in between these extremes. The rejection of biological determinism and the corresponding emphasis on gender as a social construction characterize most current feminist thinking.

Feminists have drawn on the important work of French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, whose crucial book, *The History of Sexuality* (1980), emphasised the way in which different sexual categories and identities developed in different centuries, largely because of the work of psychologists, medical scientists and other experts. According to Foucault, the concept of "the homosexual" as a form of fixed sexual identity did not appear until the 19<sup>th</sup> century; before then, the practice we now call "homosexual" was just part of an array of sexual activities in which men and women might engage. Thus, for Foucault, sexuality too, is a construction. Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher, argues that all forms of binary categorisation are in themselves oppressive. His philosophical method of deconstructionism (the breaking down of binary categories) was very attractive to a new generation of feminists who were influenced by the ideas of postmodernism and post-structuralism.

Other interpretations of gender have challenged the adequacy of the sex/gender distinction, arguing that the idea sex is a natural fact, is not self-evidently true but is itself a culturally constructed notion. An alternative to this understanding of sex as natural and gender as cultural is Judith Butler's influential theory of 'gender performativity' (Bevir 2010). The work of Judith Butler (1990, 1991 and 1993) is a vital contribution to the post-structuralist gender theory. Butler develops her analysis of gender via Foucault, Freud, Derrida, Lacan and the French feminists. She sees physiological sex, as well as gender, as socially constructed phenomena. Her work is particularly significant in challenging the boundaries between gender/sex through explaining how sex is too socially constructed and made meaningful through the scientific as well as social discourses that construct it.

She argued that there are no fixed foundations of gender categories and therefore of feminist strategies. Judith Butler argued in *Gender Trouble* that sex is not prior to gender; rather, sex “ought to be understood as an effect” of cultural constructions of gender (1990: 6). Butler argues that we should understand sex and gender in terms of performativity; in our daily lives we repeatedly ‘do gender’, act out being a man or woman in ways that give the illusion of fixity and stability: “gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (1990: 33). Performativity theory is a more thoroughgoing version of social constructivism. As a lesbian, she argues that the main route to gender emancipation is through challenging the rules of performances to create “transgressive” gender activities and identities. Thus, she advocates drag and cross-dressing, adopting individualised and mixed forms of sexual identity, as ways in which we can break down binary thinking on gender. Drag, for Butler, exposes the fallacy of the dominant belief in an original or primary gender identity. Butler’s theory suggests that “rather than being the expression of sex, or the cultural production of sex . . . gender, in fact, regulates the notion that sex is the natural condition of the human body” (Butler 1990: 177). So the feminists challenge the enlightenment concept of rationality and truth. According to some writers, gender identities might even disappear; thus Judith Grant has argued that “The aim of feminist politics is the end of gender and the creation of new human beings who are self-determining and fully participate in the development of their own constantly evolving subjectivity” (Grant 1993:183)

### 3. Gender and Neoliberal Politics

Gender and neoliberalism are two different concepts, used differently, depending on disciplinary orientation. Gender interconnects with neoliberalism in a number of ways. The 1980s and 1990s saw the demise of authoritarian regimes in many parts of the world. This revitalised the discourse over participatory and democratic governance and gave a major impulse to human rights agendas. The last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also saw the ascendance of neoliberal agendas in many parts of the world, with regressive social and economic consequences. This has placed significant constraints on the substantiation of human rights in general and women’s rights in particular (Molyneux and Razavi 2002).

Neoliberalism refers to a set of ideas and practices centred on an increased role for the free market, reconfiguration of state welfare activities and flexibility in labour markets. The ideology of neoliberalism rose to prominence in the 1980s under the Reagan administration in the US and Thatcher’s premiership in the UK. It expanded its economic reach globally through international organizations such as the IMF, the World Trade Organization and the World Bank (Gill and Scharff 2011). David Harvey, in his seminal book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, argues that “the theory proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free trade and free markets” (2005: 2). It is a political philosophy and ideology that affects every dimension of social life (Giroux 2004). Neoliberalism is a pervasive discourse in development economics and policy-making, based on the assumed centrality of privatisation, marketisation, deregulation and flexibilisation

(Griffin 2010). It developed in Europe and the USA in response to global changes that challenged the domination of western institution (Duggan 2003). Wendy Larner (2000) has argued that neoliberalism is both a political discourse about the nature of rule and a set of practices that facilitate the governing of individuals. It goes hand in hand with capitalism and its major focus is to generate more profit. During the 1980s and 1990s there were three broad perspectives of gender studies: radical feminism, liberal or equal rights feminism and Marxist/materialist feminism.

Marxist feminists modelled sexual repression as a facet of class power. They focused on labour relations and the economic base of society, and a revolutionary approach in which the overthrow of capitalism was seen as essential to the dismantling of male privilege (Beasley 1999: 60-1). Marxist feminists expose the class nature of women's oppression. By contrast, radical feminists saw gender as the primal source of social inequality. For liberal propensity, gender is a form of discrimination relating to ascribed biogenetic differences of the sex (Bradley 2007).

The 1980s were also notable for the moral and political dominance of the New Right, headed by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and the accompanying deployment on a global basis of neo-liberal economic policies. The period has been witness not only to the prioritisation of gender inequality and poverty as two of the most challenging barriers to economic and social justice in a globalising world, but also to their progressive intertwining (Chant 2010). The gap of poverty escalated profoundly. The literature that emerged in the early 1990s shows the gender blindness of neoclassical economics and the markedly negative effects of neoliberal policies on women (see Elson 1992; Sparr 1995). One of the salient essays of Neil Davidson's (2013) in *International Socialism* gives the history of neoliberalism its required extent and historical intricacy. He shows neoliberalism to be both (a) a set of political policies to enable capital to accumulate and to smash the working class and its organizations and (b) a new economic strategy of capital accumulation adopted after the crisis of 1973–1974. In a neoliberal world, men, especially those who are geopolitically, economically, ethnically, and racially privileged, persist to dominate institutions of authority and power worldwide.

Gender and the politics are mutual in nature; Joan Scott refers in her article, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis", to "the particular and contextually specific ways in which politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics." (1986: 1070). Gender constructs and transforms political inequalities. Political institutions, laws, and political practices produce gender. As Lisa Baldez argues in her work "Intersectionality," because "gender never [. . .] operates independently of other aspects of political life [. . .] it is misleading to think of gender as an autonomous category of analysis" (207: 229). One of the leading scholars on the subject, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, argued in his well-known article, "Transnational Feminist Crossings: On Neoliberalism and Radical Critique": "Neoliberal states use gender-and-development discourse to underwrite a retrenchment from radical feminist politics – delegitimising and domesticating such politics. The state is thus made "postfeminist" before feminists achieve gender justice! ...This shift in vocabulary from feminism to post-feminism and from race (and racism) to post-race (and post-racism) in

popular culture was meant to signify a movement beyond “old” forms of domination and inequality like racism, sexism, and (hetero) patriarchy” (2013: 972-973).

Centred on the achievability of economic ‘development’ through the social embedding of the market, neoliberal discourses have rather effectively communicated certain culturally constructed truths and knowledge on a worldwide scale as simple ‘common sense’, dominating both globalisation discourse and modern development policy-making (Griffin 2007; 2010).

The models of democracy that developed appeared to have universal appeal, but in fact they concentrated on the public sphere and the interests of men. Feminist discussions about democracy have developed along a number of lines. One of these critiques liberal, universalist models of democracy as involving masculine values, for example “a psychology of competitive self-interest in material things, rationality and individualism” (cited in Monoro 2005: 185).

In the early 1990s there occurred a quite remarkable shift in the feminist approach to the study of gender. The practitioners and scholars refer to this as the “postmodern turn”. M. Barrett and A. Phillips (1992), regarded as one of the earliest commentaries on this development, argued in their book *Destabilising Theory* that this effectively amounted to a ‘paradigm’ shift, i.e., an inclusive alteration in the way theorists began to comprehend what gender is (ontology) and how gender should be studied (epistemology). Today’s society is not simply either modern or postmodern, and that women, especially, occupy a variety of worlds, traditional (as wives and mothers), modern (as workers and citizens) and postmodern (as consumers and participants in contemporary culture), each with its own oppressions, opportunities and politics (Coole 1993: 222).

#### **4. Does Gender Still Matter?**

Why study gender? The basic premise of this section is that gender matters in social life. It is complex and changing over time. It matters as a source of collective and personal identity (Woodward 2011). It is one of the organising principles of the social world. The concept of gender organises our self-concepts and identities, structures our interactions and one of the basis upon which the resources and powers are allocated. Moreover, gender is a pervasive and tenacious force; its existence extends across space and time (Wharton 2005). It matters because gender is central to our sense of who we are. It constitutes to matter because the evidence that is organised on the basis of gender demonstrates structural inequalities between men and women. The persistence of gender inequalities makes gender particularly important to activists and to policy makers (Woodward 2011). Gendered roles and identities of modernity continue to shape contemporary political and social practices. That would undermine endeavours to achieve full equality for women (Fleming 1997).

The conception of gender also matters in the ways that it shapes social interaction. Social interaction seems to entail sex classification. As Ridgeway argues: “it is striking that people are nearly incapable of interacting with one another when they cannot guess the other’s sex” (1997: 219). That the recognition of someone as male or female assists social interaction testifies to this category’s power in social life. Gender remains a central organising principle of modern life, “in virtually every culture, gender difference is a pivotal way in

which humans identify themselves as persons, organize social relations, and symbolize meaningful natural and social events and processes” (Harding 1986: 18).

Gender matters because its study concerns the scrutiny of norms and standards in the global political economy that many hold to be true, essential and universal but a committed critique of which reveals to be power-laden, regulatory and highly restrictive (Griffin 2010).

### Conclusion

World is dominated by neoliberal neo-patriarchy. So, the gender inequalities and gender divisions have developed in enormously varied parts of the world. The rising bureaucratisation and complication of societies, the emergence of centralised states and the appearance of neo-liberal capitalist production mutually constituted the most important structural factors that account for historical development and persistence of the gender division and gender inequality (Frader 2004). The object/subject dichotomy that eliminates women from realm of the subject has had an unfathomable effect on the status of women in the contemporary time. Their sexual and reproductive choices are still constrained; and the lives of many are restricted or ruined by the fear or reality of male violence.

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