

Analysis: Explaining gender violence in the neoliberal era

Saturday 12 December 2020, by [BHATTACHARYA Tithi](#) (Date first published: December 2013).

Contents

- [Social reproduction as a \(...\)](#)
- [What constitutes social \(...\)](#)
- [The attack on social provision](#)
- [The EPZs as theaters of \(...\)](#)
- [Inventing tradition](#)
- [Resources of resistance](#)

Let us begin with an image: a naked white man pursuing a low-wage Black female asylum seeker down the corridors of an expensive Manhattan hotel in order to force her to have sex with him. The man, of course, is the then-director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), French politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn, and the woman, thirty-three-year-old Nafissatou Diallo, a housekeeper at Strauss-Kahn's hotel who was also at the time seeking asylum in the United States from her native Guinea, a former colony of France. Although all criminal charges of rape and assault were dropped against the IMF chief, he had to pay a somewhat heavy price that included, among other things, his resignation and a hefty financial settlement to Ms. Diallo. Was justice, then, served? The answer should be of interest to all revolutionary Marxists. This is because a veritable cartography of dispossession extends between these two figures, and it is the purpose of this essay to outline that map.¹

This image ought to be considered an icon for our times. It is iconic in the sense that the scene captures a moment when the distinction between the individual and societal vanishes, and the individuals—the naked wealthy white man and the Black low-waged woman—emerge as pure embodiments of the societal.

Needless to say, the representative power of the image of Strauss-Kahn assaulting Diallo lies in the actual power that international financial institutions such as the IMF have over countries of the Global South such as Guinea. From the 1980s onwards, the Keynesian steering of national economies was systematically dismantled in favor of a new mode of capital accumulation. This new era, accurately christened neoliberalism in hindsight, reversed, in the words of Nancy Fraser, “the previous formula, which sought to ‘use politics to tame markets’” and instituted a new political process of using “markets to tame politics.”² In countries such as Diallo's Guinea, this took the form of extra-national institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank imposing Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) “at the gun point of debt.”³

When analyzing neoliberalism, mainstream commentators tend to guide the conversation toward a discussion of certain sections of the formal economy, most often those sections of the economy over which ordinary people have the least control. In this version, understanding how our world changed from the 1980s seems to be limited to understanding how the stock market works or how a credit

default swap takes place. As revolutionary Marxists, however, we understand capitalism not merely as a collection of economic processes but as an integrated system of socioeconomic relationships. We see neoliberalism as a particular strategy developed by capital in the postwar era that has a far denser history and more far-reaching consequences than the buying and selling of derivatives.

Neil Davidson's recent essay in *International Socialism*⁴ gives the history of neoliberalism its required breadth and historical complexity. Davidson's is an outstanding comprehensive account of the involved and often contradictory processes that went into the making of neoliberalism as a "political-economic" strategy developed by ruling class "vanguards" (such as Margaret Thatcher in the UK) from the mid-1970s in response to capitalism's crisis of profitability. He shows neoliberalism to be both (a) a new economic strategy of capital accumulation adopted after the crisis of 1973-1974, and (b) a set of political policies to enable capital to accumulate and to smash the working class and its organizations. Over the forty years that Davidson maps, it is only natural to find that the policies of elected governments across the world did not always coincide with the new needs of capital reorganization along neoliberal lines. Hence the system was in need of political vanguards in the ruling class—Davidson calls them bourgeois "anti-Lenin[s]"—who succeeded in leading class wars within their own national economies to ensure the development of neoliberalism. Although it took time and several adjustments, neoliberalism as economic policy, political strategy, and (consequently) ideology became hegemonic between 1973-1974 and the financial crash of 2008:

Once the neoliberal order had been established in the US and imposed on the transnational economic institutions which it controls, the model acquired a cumulative force: in the developed world the need to compete with the US compelled other states to try to adopt the organizational forms which seemed to have given that economy its advantage; in the Global South states accepted conditions which restructured their economies in neoliberal ways in order to obtain access to loans and aid.⁵

Davidson's narrative is a magisterial overview of more than forty years of global history and political economy. Although he does not specifically address the fate of gender under neoliberalism, Davidson nevertheless makes a number of incisive observations about the individuation of social life under this order that ought to be taken seriously. First, he notes how social services were not abandoned by the state but "reconfigured" such that care of children or family members "increasingly . . . passed from the state to the family—which generally mean[t] the female members of the family—with these 'informal' arrangements then subject[ed] to evaluation by state agencies." More significantly for purposes of this essay, Davidson, following sociologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, reminds us that the unintentional consequence of increased social inequality under neoliberalism was a virtual breakdown of cohesive social relations "despite there being no government intention to lower social cohesion or to increase violence, teenage births, obesity, drug abuse and everything else . . . [these were] . . . an unintended consequence of the changes in income distribution."⁶

This essay aims to further develop this insight. How did neoliberal policies and its attendant ideology affect gender relations? Can we understand gender violence as an outcome—often intended as ideology and policy from the ruling class—of socioeconomic processes? Since, following Davidson, we understand the consolidation of the neoliberal order to be fragmented and irregular across space (nation-states) and time (1970s—to the present), it is important to underscore that the fate of gender relations follows this combined but uneven trajectory. What this essay indicates are general outlines of a framework for understanding the relationship between gender and the political economy, not necessarily a detailed historical account of specific countries or policies. Key elements of the argument are:

First, the last four decades of neoliberalism have created a marked escalation in gender crimes in most countries. The financial crisis of 2008 exacerbated what was already a serious problem; this is no longer a situation of “business as usual” and it requires socialists to critically engage with the problem.

Second, as Marxists it is not enough for us to describe the effects of this current intensification of violence, we need to also provide an explanation for it.

Third, capitalism, faced with a crisis, is seeking a resolution in two connected ways: (a) through an attempt to restructure production, as manifest in the drive for austerity and (b) by trying to reorder social reproduction, as evidenced in its efforts to recraft gender identities and recirculate certain ideologies regarding the working-class family. In order to understand this simultaneity and unity in capitalist restructuring, we need to revisit the Marxist analysis of women’s oppression that is best approached through the analytical framework of social reproduction theory.

Social reproduction as a framework

Social reproduction is a key concept of Marxist political economy that shows how the “production of goods and services and the production of life are part of one integrated process.”⁷ According to Marx, human labor is the source of all value under capitalism. Lise Vogel, following Marx, defines labor power as “a capacity borne by a human being and distinguishable from the bodily and social existence of its bearer.”⁸ In class societies, the dominant class is able to harness labor power’s ability to create use-values for their own benefit. At the same time, the bearers of labor power are people—they get sick or injured, grow old, and eventually die and need to be replaced. Therefore, some process of reproducing labor power, meeting their daily needs and replacing them over time, is necessary.

Although Marx viewed the reproduction of labor power as critical to social reproduction, he did not provide a full explanation of exactly what such reproduction entailed. Vogel suggests three kinds of processes that comprise the reproduction of labor power in class societies: (a) various daily activities that restore direct producers and allow them to return to work; (b) similar activities directed at non-working members of the subordinate class (children, elderly, infirm people, or people who are not part of the workforce for other reasons); and (c) activities that replace those members of the subordinate class who no longer work for whatever reason.

Social reproduction theory, then, is crucial to understanding certain key features of the system.

1. **The unity of the socioeconomic whole:** It is certainly true that in any capitalist society the majority exist through a combination of wage labor and unpaid domestic labor to maintain themselves and their households. It is critical to understand both kinds of labor as part of the same process.
2. **The contradiction between capital accumulation and social reproduction:** Capitalism’s sway over social reproduction is not absolute. Indeed social reproduction may create the essential ingredient of production, i.e., humans, but the actual practices of reproducing life develop and unfold in tension with production. Capitalists attempt to extract as much work as possible from the worker, but the worker in turn tries to extract as much in wages and benefits as possible as ingredients that will allow her to reproduce herself, individually and generationally, for another day.
3. **Bosses have an interest in social reproduction:** Social reproduction should not be understood solely as the lonely housewife cleaning and cooking such that her worker husband can get to work refreshed every morning. The employer is invested in the specifics of how and

to what extent the worker has been socially reproduced. In this sense, it is not simply the food, clothing, and morning readiness at the gates of capital that matter, but everything from education, “language capacities . . . general health,” even “predispositions toward work” that determine the quality of labor power available.⁹ Each cultural capacity is again determined by historic specificity and is open to negotiation by both sides. Labor laws, policies about public health and education, and state support for unemployment are only some of the many outcomes and constitutive sites for such bargaining.

This is why we need to sharpen our understanding of social reproduction as being performed in three interlocking ways: (a) as unpaid labor in the family increasingly being performed by *both* men and women; (b) as services provided by the state in the form of a social wage to somewhat attenuate the unpaid labor in the home; and finally (c) as services sold for profit by the market.

Neoliberal policies scaffolded by the rhetoric of individual responsibility sought to dismantle state services and turn social reproduction entirely over to individual families or sell them on the market. It is important to note that capitalism as a system *benefits* from the unpaid labor of social reproduction within the family and the limited expenditure on the social wage outside of the home. The system cannot afford to fully dispense with social reproduction “without endangering the process of accumulation” since social reproduction ensures the continued existence of the one article that capitalism needs most of all: human labor.¹⁰ Understanding this contradictory dependence of production on social reproduction is key to understanding the political economy of gender relations, including gender violence.

But before we seek to understand how social reproduction theory can explain gender relations, we should acknowledge the extent of gender violence of recent years that makes such an investigation a matter of urgency. The first comprehensive study of violence against women from the World Health Organization, published in 2013, assessed that one-third of all women worldwide, 35.6 percent, will experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, usually from a male partner. The highest levels of violence against women are in Africa, where nearly half of all women, 45.6 percent, will suffer physical or sexual violence. In low- and middle-income Europe, the proportion is 27.2 percent; and one-third of women in high-income countries, 32.7 percent, will experience violence at some stage in their life.¹¹

There is then a correlation between poverty and gendered violence, but what really are the ingredients of that connection?

Many have used the Marxist understanding of alienation to illuminate this relationship. For example, one author seeking to explain rape points out:

Rape doesn't happen because of men's “natural” instincts. It results from the way that class society distorts sexuality and alienates people from each other and themselves. . . . We become alienated from ourselves and from each other. Rape and sexual violence are some of the most extreme forms that this alienation takes.¹²

It is undeniable that all expressions of sex, sexuality, and gender are alienated under capitalism. Marx, however, understands alienation not as individual or contingent dissatisfactions and frustrations—that may rise or fall during specific periods—but as a condition which affects everyone in class society, including the ruling class. Alienation as an explanatory tool *by itself* also does not fully explain why it is that the majority of rapes and instances of sexual violence are committed by men and not by women. Put differently, alienation, as understood by Marxists, is a pervasive

condition under capitalism while sexual violence is a much more specific phenomenon, in the sense that while everyone is, at all times, alienated under capitalism not everyone suffers sexual violence on a daily basis.¹³

Instead of starting with the concept of alienation, I suggest that we start by laying bare the multiple interacting factors that might produce *the conditions of possibility* for gendered violence. Those factors, affecting gender and relationships within the family, however, are not restricted to the “private sphere” of social life, outside the ambit of the formal economy. Indeed, the fate of social reproduction under neoliberalism shows, inter alia, how the dynamics of production (formal economy) have the capacity to disrupt the processes of social reproduction (“private sphere”) and vice versa.

Social reproduction theory, is in part a historical materialist account of social provisioning, or an account of how women and men are able to procure and access the means of sustenance, both material and psychical, in order to face another day of work. These means are historically determined and depend upon a given society’s specific circumstances, such as its general level of development/infrastructure and the standard of living the working class has been able to wrest from capital for itself. In some societies, the rise in the price of bread or rice may throw the working class family into crisis, while in others the point of crisis might arrive with the privatization of essential social services. Since women continue to carry the vast bulk of social provisioning within the home, the changes that take place in the dynamics of social provisioning and the extent to which it can or cannot take place within the enclosure of “safe” spaces also determines the contours of gender relationships.

What constitutes social provisioning?

What are some of the fundamental components of social provisioning for the vast majority of people? Food and shelter are two basic requisites for reproduction to take place—and following from those, other socialized services necessary for maintaining human life and dignity such as healthcare, education, childcare, pensions, and public transport.

Shelter, or home—just like the family—operates at two opposing registers under capitalism. On the one hand, the home appears as a safer place to most of us as compared to the violence and uncertainty of the public world. Real human relations of love and cooperation can flourish within the four walls of a home captured fleetingly in a child’s laughter or a kiss shared between a couple. But the home, shielded from public scrutiny, can also be a theater of personal violence and shameful secrets. Anyone who has witnessed a woman trying to hide discolored bruises with a scarf or seen a child clamming up over a discussion about a “loving” uncle knows the extent of such horrors. However the psychic dynamics of the family as an institution are played out, the home nevertheless serves as a shelter in a cruder and more material sense. It is literally the physical shelter that allows the worker to rest before the next day’s labor.

It is no surprise then that in the post-2008 Global North a significant contributor to the rise in intimate partner violence has been the financial stress associated with mortgage arrears and foreclosures, or in the language of social reproduction, due to the annihilation of a safe shelter as one of the basic components of reproducing the laboring body. In the United States, data from the Census and the National Survey of Families and Households have conclusively proven women in general and African American women in particular as most at risk of being victims of both predatory loans and from the domestic violence resulting from foreclosures and evictions. A report on the recession from the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence states this connection in very

clear terms:

Women who leave their abusive partners often stay with family members or friends . . . If family members and friends cannot house them, they may go to domestic violence or homeless shelters. Research shows that nearly one fifth of DV survivors combine informal (family/friends) and formal (domestic violence/homeless shelters) sources of housing assistance when they leave abusive partners . . . But this same research also shows that more than a third of DV survivors report becoming homeless as a result of trying to end the abusive relationship . . . This percentage may rise because of the current economic downturn . . . Unfortunately . . . the already strained budgets of service providers, including domestic violence and homeless shelters, are being cut at the same time that they are facing greater need.¹⁴

There are numerous stories documenting this overlap between the 2008 housing meltdown and domestic violence. For example, there is the 2008 suicide of an older husband and wife in Oregon that followed their home foreclosure.¹⁵ In Los Angeles, California, an unemployed man who once worked for PricewaterhouseCoopers and Sony Pictures murdered his wife, three sons, and his mother-in-law before turning the gun on himself. He left a suicide note saying that he had been financially ruined and had considered suicide, but decided in the end to kill his entire family as it was more “honorable.”¹⁶ Let us archive away the significant use of the word “honorable,” we will have cause to return to it later.

Next let us look at food, water, and other products that make up household economies that embody women’s labor and responsibility. In this context it is important to remember that women have often produced goods of use value within the home. For women in the pre-1920s Global North, such commodities included hand-stitched clothes, lace, and baked goods, while in the Global South before the onset of structural adjustments, women procured fuel and processed food grains for their families. Because they fell outside the circuit of commodity production, both the products and the producer of this kind of labor were invisible to the formal economy. In the North, from the 1920s and 1930s, the rapid expansion in the production of electric household appliances and processed food entirely changed the picture. First, white middle-class women’s, and subsequently all women’s participation in the commodity economy rose rapidly.

In the Global South, the annihilation of the subsistence economy and women’s full integration into the market came later and at the behest of neoliberal policies. In several parts of West Africa, for instance, SAP agreements have forced governments to cut financial aid to public water companies. Yet, water—the essential ingredient to cooking, cleaning and care work—is a woman’s responsibility. So in locations where the government does not provide water due to cuts, women do. In rural Senegal women will walk up to ten kilometers (6.2 miles) to fetch water for the family.

The picture is even starker in the case of food. One of the major demands of the IMF on southern economies was that they devalue their currency. The goal of devaluation was to raise the price of imported goods and thereby to reduce the consumption of these goods. Of course, food, fuel, and medicines form the bulk of imported goods for southern countries.

Two kinds of processes, then, take place in the home under capitalism. On the one hand, it continues to be the caring, non-instrumental space in an increasingly commercialized and hostile world. On the other hand, it is also the site of highly gendered expectations—where at the end of a tyrannical shift at work one anticipates a hot meal and a bed, both “made” by women. This contradiction is true for nearly all periods of capitalism’s history. But in the four decades under neoliberalism, the home was

hollowed out of all subsistence resources—there remains no vegetable garden in the back, no common lands to gather firewood, and the lone rice mill in the yard was sold in order to pay for packaged rice from Texas. Yet the need for material provisioning for the human laboring body within the home remains, laced with the ideological expectation that women ought to be providing for such a need in the form of food, water, and care. The real material need for food and shelter combined with the highly ideological expectation that women are responsible for meeting that need within the home, provide the conditions of possibility of gendered violence.

The attack on social provisioning

Neoliberal restructuring of global capitalism from the 1980s played a specific part in the story of social reproduction in general and social provisioning in particular. It is important to understand that neoliberal policies were so effective in the sphere of production and trade because they simultaneously eliminated the supports that underwrote the work of social reproduction. From health care and education to community services and public transit, the public infrastructure was rapidly stripped in a manner similar to how in many parts of the world the land was stripped for the new emerging extractive industries.

How did this help capital? The elimination of public support for social reproduction did not mean that workers were then excused from being workers in the sphere of production. Instead, this simply meant that all support that was previously public was either transferred onto individual families or privatized and priced out of reach for the vast majority. Public parks, whose infrastructure was built with public money, got injected with fresh cash from corporations and closed their gates to working-class children. There were still pools, after-school programs, and decent health care, but only for those who could afford them. “By default *and* by design then, families, particularly the women within them picked up the work not provided publicly and not affordable personally.”¹⁷ This made all workers, male and female, vulnerable in the workplace and less able to resist the assault.

When the neoliberal era faced its crowning meltdown in the global financial crisis of 2008, social reproduction for the global working class was already under severe strain.

It is now a well-documented fact that the financial crisis caused a rise in gendered violence. In the UK, domestic violence rose 35 percent in 2010. In Ireland there was a 21 percent rise in 2008 of the number of women who accessed domestic violence services compared to 2007, the number rose even further in 2009, up 43 percent from 2007 figures. In the United States, according to a 2011 private survey, 80 percent of shelters nationwide reported an increase in domestic violence cases for the third year in a row; 73 percent of these cases were attributed to “financial issues” including job loss. I am using the 2008 financial crisis as one such instance of capitalist crisis, bearing in mind that it is neither the first nor the last. Indeed, social scientists have regularly used the research metrics of the 1930s Great Depression in the West to understand the domestic relations of subsequent economic crises. How does this picture of escalated violence fit our social provisioning framework?

Unable to meet their families’ needs within the home, women were often literally forced from the home to forage on the street. A World Bank survey of civil society organizations found that during the economic crisis poor people “resorted to increased participation of women and children in subsistence activities, like cardboard collection” on the streets.¹⁸

The financial crisis did not just add to the burden of reproduction, but wide-scale job losses and wage-cutting by bosses meant that women were either forced to take on more than one paid job or accept worse conditions at their current jobs.

But even when women worked ever-longer hours, and became the chief breadwinner in the family, women's labor in the *public* sphere continued to carry the stamp of informal unwaged work that she performed in the *private* sphere. Consider the case of the United States, where sixty-five million jobs were created during the era of neoliberal restructuring and women filled 60 percent of those jobs, between 1964 and 1997. But what kind of jobs were these? Sociologist Susan Thistle shows how:

Women have been instrumental in the rapid expansion of the low wage lower tier of the service sector, providing the bulk of workers in both the fastest and largest areas of such low wage growth. . . .

Economists have long recognized . . . that the development of new regions and the conversion of nonwage workers into wage workers can create great profits, leading corporations to set up factories overseas. . . . we must realize that a similar lucrative process was happening within the United States itself. . . . As the market reached into kitchens and bedrooms turning many household tasks into work for pay productivity rose greatly. . . .¹⁹

Because it is unregulated and free from labor laws, the true horror of this so-called informal sector is that, like housework within the private sphere, it is unending and can function beyond what are considered to be acceptable business hours within that society. Two recent cases of violent rape in neoliberal India reveal the connecting tissues between neoliberal policies and assault on women.

A common method of "blaming" the victims of rape subjects the woman rather than the rapist to critical scrutiny. In India, women who have suffered rape have been blamed for being out "late at night," which, this argument goes, made them deserve their violent fate. In court, a defense attorney for three of the five men accused in the case of the woman raped and killed in Delhi in 2012 stated that "respectable" women were not raped. "I have not seen a single incident or example of rape with a respected lady," Manohar Lal Sharma told the court, instead blaming the victim for being out at night with a male friend to whom she was not married.²⁰

Both of the victims of much-publicized rape cases in Delhi—the woman killed in December 2012 and the woman attacked in Dhaula Kuan—worked at outsourced Western call centers. They worked evening schedules to correspond to daytime business hours in the West. To their low-waged, precarious position on the labor market was added the risk of nighttime walks to and from work on the streets of a city with a hideous record of state protections for women. In Lesotho, women have been raped leaving garment factories late at night, while garment workers in Bangladesh reported that working long hours and arriving home as late as 2:00 a.m. can provoke the suspicion and threats by husbands and male relatives "especially when their employers—hiding evidence of excessive overtime—had punched their...hour card to show that they left the factory at six [pm]."²¹

How should we read the widespread anxiety about female sexuality that has become the ubiquitous handmaiden of neoliberalism? In one sense, of course, it is the result of the widespread commodification of sexuality, but I propose that such anxieties are the expression of deeper mechanisms of labor discipline and violence.

The EPZs as theaters of discipline and punishment

To fully appreciate the horrors of labor discipline under neoliberalism let us take a step back and recall here our insistence on regarding capitalism as a unified socioeconomic whole. Unless we understand the global and systemic nature of capital's strategies our resistance to them will remain piecemeal and incomplete. Hence parts of the globe where capital appears to be less dominant need to be viewed through the same indices of analysis with which we subject the advanced capitalist economies of the Global North. As David McNally argues, we "miss much of ...[the] story if we ignore the phenomenal expansion across the neoliberal period of major East Asian economies, which have grown at three or four times the rate of the traditional capitalist core."²² Economies outside the core countries thus play an important role in the global process of capital accumulation. This is why no account of gendered violence and labor discipline is complete without a history of the Export Processing Zones (EPZ)—a unique and specific product of the neoliberal order—that are situated, for the most part, in the Global South.

The use of cheap female labor within special "economic zones" free from the labor laws of the country in which they are based, was first tried in South Korea during its "economic miracle." Economist Alice Amsden argues that the key to South Korea's success was the wage gap between male and female labor.²³ These zones mimic in truly macabre ways the contours of the home under capitalism. Like homes they are private, shielded from social and state scrutiny, produce items of social provisioning (clothes, shoes, food processing, toys) by female labor, and are secret theaters of rampant violence.

Women working in EPZs are subject to widespread verbal abuse, unpaid overtime, sexual harassment, forced sex, and physical violence. Women applying for these jobs have been forced to take health tests, including pregnancy tests, and examined naked and asked questions such as "Do you have a boyfriend?" and "How often do you have sex?" In Kenya, more than forty EPZs employing more than 40,000 workers produce close to 10 percent of the country's exports. Here the job competition between men and women results frequently in women being forced to have sex, despite HIV risks, in order to secure a job. International Labor Rights Fund revealed that 95 percent of Kenyan women facing workplace harassment do not report the crime; women working in the EPZs formed 90 percent of the women studied in this report. Similarly in Lesotho, EPZ women are frequently subjected to complete strip searches to ensure that they have not stolen anything, including having to remove their sanitary pads while menstruating. Close to the United States, the maquiladora factories display some of the most egregious forms of violence against women. This EPZ, established through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1992, is located in Ciudad Juarez on the US-Mexico border. Since 1993, more than 400 female workers of this EPZ have either "disappeared" or have been murdered, earning Ciudad Juarez the title "The Femicide Capital." In 2003, EPZs in 116 countries employed forty-three million people. The numbers are higher today.²⁴

Management of sexuality and management of labor, then, are braided chains of discipline that bind the most vulnerable sections of global labor. But who executes this managerial function? It is important to understand the various strands of this complicated answer. First, working-class men are not innocent in this process. A study commissioned by the International Labor Rights Fund in Kenya found that 70 percent of the men interviewed for the study viewed sexual harassment of women workers as "normal and natural."²⁵ In her groundbreaking study of maquiladora workers, Maria Fernandez-Kelly takes seriously the widespread anxiety about female sexuality in Juarez, and she links this moral panic to women's increased visibility in the public sphere. Insofar as wage labor is providing women with a certain degree of financial independence, these factory jobs, according to Fernandez-Kelly, are regarded as a threat to "traditional" forms of male authority. The fears that this

potential loss of social control engendered are “made explicit, albeit in a distorted manner” by a rhetoric of increased female promiscuity.²⁶ We will have occasion to unpack this particular concept of “tradition” in the next section.

While it is true that working-class men have some control over the time and sexuality of working-class women, they are, however, playing according to the rules set by capitalism. As Hester Eisenstein shows, in regions of low-wage labor, women receive a “woman’s wage” but men do not receive a “man’s wage.”²⁷ In 2003, *Business Week* reported the case of one Michael A. McLimans, who works as a delivery driver for Domino’s and Pizza Hut. His wife is a hotel receptionist. Together “they pull down about \$40,000 a year—far from the \$60,000 Michael’s father, David I. McLimans earned as a veteran steel worker.”²⁸

Leslie Salzinger’s work on maquiladora labor offers an excellent and accurate account of why this kind of feminization is one of the best strategies of labor management for neoliberal capital. Salzinger sets out to explain the pervasiveness of what she calls the “trope of productive femininity”—that is, the “icon of the ‘docile and dexterous’ woman worker” as both preferred and expected embodiment of export-processing labor. Salzinger shows that while the trope of productive femininity would seem to aptly describe the gendered nature of Mexico’s maquiladoras, the maquilas have always employed a large minority of men, leading her to argue that productive femininity is not necessarily about the sex of the worker but is a process of severe labor disciplining of both female and male bodies in different ways, to produce a pool of ‘maquila-grade’ labor.”²⁹

If working-class men prefer lower wages to “women’s work” and solidarity with women workers then is it patriarchy that binds all men in a conspiracy of silence and dominance? Can we talk about a so-called brotherhood of all men? The next section seeks to answer these questions by revisiting the question of “honor” and “tradition” that seem to underlie many of the justifications for gendered violence.

Inventing tradition

In an interview with the World Bank an Egyptian man from Borg Meghezel, a small fishing village in the Nile valley, had a materialist explanation for violence against women: “The insufficiency of income is what affects the man-woman relationship. Sometimes she wakes me up in the morning asking for five pounds, and if I don’t have it I get depressed and I leave the house. And when I come back, we start to fight.”³⁰ Needless to say, this particular part of the Nile Valley has been fighting an acute water crisis since the involvement of the World Bank in this region. A Ghanaian man had an even sharper appraisal of the problem: “It’s because of unemployment and poverty that most men in this community beat their wives. We have no money to look after them.”³¹

In these stark and direct accounts, we face the precise moment of violence and find that we are still left with a range of questions. So far we have talked about the context of such violence, how the home and subsistence-based communities are systematically rendered resourceless and empty. While this certainly provides the conditions for possible violence, we are still left with the problem of how to account for the historical rationale for the perpetrators of this violence. It is not enough to say that the working-class man comes home after being fired, finds an eviction notice instead of a hot meal and thus proceeds to beat his wife: because such a picture, though certainly true in many cases during this current crisis, raises many more questions. For instance, why doesn’t the working-class woman come home and beat up her husband since being fired from a job is certainly not exclusive to men and in reality more women have lost their jobs during this recession than men?

There are no real rationales for why gendered violence takes place, and yet we, as human beings, have to be able to rationalize it for ourselves at least minimally as a form of regrettable but meaningful action. Capitalist ideology seeks to provide meaning to such violent actions in two basic ways:

One is through the deeply rooted sexist idea of the gendered division of labor within the family. Despite the fact that in the vast majority of households both men and women have to work for pay outside the home, there is a sexist expectation that it is women who will take care of the home. The reasons for this are manifold and have been discussed creatively by Marxists. For our purposes, it is important to note that according to this particular aspect of sexism it is women who are expected to be responsible for providing for the family within the home and hence also responsible for any lack in provisioning.

Two, existing sexist ideas try to legitimize themselves through an appeal to tradition. In some ways this is an old capitalist trick. As early as 1852, Karl Marx pointed out that when the bourgeoisie want to justify something

they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language. Thus Luther put on the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789-1814 draped itself alternately in the guise of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire...³²

The “borrowed language,” as Marx calls it, is moreover used quite specifically. Most often it comes in the guise of ideologies that deny class divisions and emphasize what Benedict Anderson has called “a deep horizontal comradeship.”³³ For example, nations are projected as free of class divisions and religious communities are portrayed as homogenous collectives where all members supposedly have similar interests irrespective of class. Similarly, in the case of sexism, such ideas are projected under the assumption of a common brotherhood of all men (presumably against a common sisterhood of all women) and by obscuring the actual existing divisions of class and exploitation that exists between men. How does the appeal to a mythical community of men justify violence against women? Consider the appeals that people make to tradition and lineage in order to justify the misogynist violence of honor killings.

The practice of honor killings, where family members murder women considered to have violated a family’s honor, provide great grist to the imperialist mill. Racists can use honor killings as evidence of the inherent backwardness of all Muslims. A Zionist news source recently titled one of its leading op-ed articles, “Let’s Admit It: Honor Killing in the West is by Muslims.”³⁴ Similarly, such instances of violence are used as justification for Western imperialist intervention in the Middle East in the name of women’s liberation.

But how then can we explain honor killings, for it is undeniably true that they are committed in families that are most often nonwhite and have certain historic connections with specific countries in the Global South?

According to the Iranian and Kurdish Women’s Rights Organization (IKWRO), more than [2,800 honor-related cases](#) of violence were reported in the UK in 2010. Evidence from police reports suggests an increase of 47 percent since 2009.

The guardian journalist, Fareena Alam, provides a heartbreaking but materialist analysis of such

killings. Writing in 2004 she asserts correctly that: (1) "Honor killings are not a Muslim problem"; and (2) "Honor crimes have no relation to religiosity."³⁵ Instead, she shows how "most migrant families, including mine, stay closely connected to relatives 'back home.'" This is an enriching connection that "offers a safety net in the face of a hostile society." However, Alam is far from misty-eyed about such networks:

[T]oo often these networks are sexist, stifle dissent and demand loyalty at all costs. . . . Young men are allowed to carry on a relatively unsupervised public life—socializing, drinking and womanizing. Upholding honor, which is linked closely to social standing and upward mobility, falls to women. The mere allegation of impropriety—such as being seen with a man outside the family network—can damage a woman's, and thus her family's, reputation. . . . Honor killing is neither simply a gender issue nor an individual aberration. It is symptomatic of how immigrant families attempt to cope with an alienating urbanization. In villages "back home," a man's sphere of control was broader, with a large support system. . . . Failed efforts to retain control can be devastating—enough to generate the unimaginable rage that it must take to kill one's kin.³⁶

For our purposes Alam's argument about the *perceived* loss of male control as a trigger for violence is important. While honor killings maybe extreme examples of violence, a wide range of gendered violence seems to take place in the name of loss of "traditional" male authority or control.

A study published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2012 found that across Europe suicide rates rose sharply from 2007 to 2009 as the financial crisis drove unemployment up and squeezed incomes. The countries worst hit by severe economic downturns, such as Greece and Ireland, saw the most dramatic increases in suicides. In the UK, men were found to be three times more likely to commit suicide than women, resulting in the study's conclusion that, "Much of men's identity and sense of purpose is tied up with having a job. It brings income, status, importance. . . ." ³⁷ In 2011, *Time* magazine echoed this view that the recession created a loss of 'traditional' roles for men and resulted in a rise in male depression: "With men culturally shouldering the role of primary breadwinner for their important factor in depression risk, is often contingent on their role as provider."³⁸

The operative word here is "culturally shouldering." All these reports and studies indicate that although men were not always the primary breadwinners in the family, they *believed or expected* that this was indeed their real role.

The reality in the United States, as in the rest of the industrialized world, is that, increasingly, *both men and women work* (paid labor) to maintain a household; and *both men and women work at home* (unpaid labor) to take care of the house and children.

Most recent US studies on employment show that women are breadwinners for 40 percent of families—a vast majority of them single mothers and women of color. We can add to this actual reality the data from twenty industrialized countries over the period 1965–2003 that reveal an overall cross-country increase in men's proportional contribution to family work.

The same is true for men/fathers helping in the home. Sociologist Francine Deutsch noted that working-class fathers perform more hours of child care than their managerial counterparts.³⁹ According to a 2011 survey of 963 fathers holding white-collar jobs in Fortune 500 companies, 53 percent of the fathers said that they would consider being stay-at-home parents if their family could

live on their spouse's salary.⁴⁰ While people at the top of society castigate men of color for abandoning their families, research by the American Psychological Association and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development disproves all such racist mythology:

Low-income, minority, and non-residential fathers who have jobs and education are more likely to be involved with their children.

. . . African American men are more likely to physically care for, feed and prepare meals for their infants than either white or Hispanic fathers.

Some ethnographic data has emerged that significant amounts of paternal financial support (both cash and in-kind aid) may go unreported in formal systems.⁴¹

This indeed is a strange phenomenon. While the *material reality* of most men is that in families both partners work for increasingly lower wages and increasingly longer hours, yet *expectations of gender* seem to be based on a mythical model of the happy wife cooking at home and waiting for her male spouse to return home from work. If the vast majority of women are working in maquiladoras, Wal-Mart, and Starbucks, or housekeeping for the rich, then whose dreams are forging these cardboard cutouts of femininity? We should examine this cardboard cutout closely because as we trace its real lineage we can begin to understand how the justification for gender violence is rooted in a combination of material reality and ideological expectations about gender.

The legal scholar Joan C. Williams makes an important observation about working-class masculinity in her recent work on the relationship between class and gender in America. According to Williams, gender acts as an "important 'hidden injury of class'" reflected in "the sense of inadequacy that stems from working class men's ever-increasing inability to perform as bread-winners."⁴² Williams' account of how this perceived inadequacy is played out in class terms deserves to be quoted in full:

For two brief generations after World War II, the separate-spheres ideal was democratized, but today the ability to achieve the breadwinner ideal is once again tied to class privilege.

. . . Because breadwinner-homemaker families have signaled middle-class status since the 1780s, successful performance of these roles is seen as vital among working class families . . . Conventional gender performance, in short, is a class act.⁴³

Williams' timeline for when the traditional gender model of "breadwinner-homemaker" becomes unfeasible for the working class, exactly match the timeline Davidson sets out for the beginning of the neoliberal order. The traditional breadwinner-homemaker role and the gendered expectations that flow from it, then, was never a working-class tradition to begin with, but was loaned to the working class by capital. The power of this model lies precisely in its ability to (a) erase actual existing class differences by presenting a universal brotherhood of all men; and (b) divide the working class along gender lines by imputing unrealistic gender expectations on both men and women, which, by necessity, will always fail in reality.

Let us now take a second look at our cardboard figure. The model wife and her model family, whether pulling off the perfect dinner in New York or New Delhi is in fact a class warrior. Her ideal family is preserved in the timeless amber of capital's glory days where men will always be men, labor unions will always be unheard of, and slaves or lower castes will always bring home the cotton.

Resources of resistance

In the current crisis of capital, gender is an important ideological weapon used to hide the fault lines of class. The rising tide of rape defense from figures of social standing, the spate of bills attacking reproductive and LGBTQ rights, slut shaming and victim blaming are various ways to reorder femininity and re-invoke the mythic breadwinner-homemaker family, thus providing ballast to unrealistic gender expectations and models for working-class men and women.

How do we fight capitalism's family values? In conclusion, it is worthwhile to point toward the challenges we face as we try to revivify new ways to apply Marxism to our world.

There are in the main three interrelated challenges that we face as revolutionaries in the current era: (1) understanding the precise nature of capitalism as a system of production; (2) identifying the subject of revolutionary transformation of the system; and (3) determining the nature of that transformative process—how does it start, what are its sites, and so on. The answers to these three problems help determine whether and how we can change the fate of gender in our present day world.

Neoliberalism as a new way of organizing capital accumulation may last for some time yet. But it is important to qualify the extent and limitations of its novelty. While we discuss the various new kinds of economic arrangements and forms of social relations this new assemblage of capital has thrown up for us, it is equally important to emphasize the continuities that exist. The economics of neoliberalism, although varied in its national expressions, do not herald a new kind of capitalism, but rather a set of heterogeneous efforts, initially tried and later systematized, by ruling classes over time to overcome the crisis of profitability inherent in capitalism. In other words, unlike what some scholars have suggested, this is not a new form of capitalism but rather a new form in which capitalism is trying to recover and maintain profits. This means that the fundamental insights of classical Marxism about capitalism as a system still hold, as do its conclusions about how to fight it—namely through the self-activity of the working class.

As we saw throughout this essay, a key to neoliberalism's triumph always was, and remains today, a successful and highly gendered attack on the global working class. After all, it is an order built on a series of defeats for our side, the most spectacular examples being those of the air traffic controllers in the United States (1981), the mill workers in India (1982) and the miners in the UK (1984-85).⁴⁴ Trade unions, which remain a primary, often the only, expression of working-class organization and tool of struggle, continue to be a major target for neoliberalism's onslaughts. But the long history of defeats and the relatively few instances of successful fightback by workers have led some scholars to question the centrality of the working class as the agent of change and doubt whether workers still have the capacity to bring the system to a halt and build a new world. Instead, many have looked to more amorphous collectives—the most famous being Michael Hardt and Anthony Negri's notion of the "multitude."⁴⁵

Meanwhile the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement in the United States have thrown up yet another question regarding the validity of classical Marxism, this time around the arena of struggle. Since occupations of public spaces in Spain, Tahrir, Zucotti, and most recently Gezi Park have been one of the more militant and mass expressions of struggle in recent years, it is only normal for many

to see in this political form of insurgent urban movements a new, possibly better path to capitalism's demise rather than strikes or disruptions by workers at the point of production.⁴⁶

Revolutionary Marxism's task, unlike that of a fortune-teller, is not to predict where the next round of struggle will take place. Nor can it predict which particular struggle will take a generalized form through the system. In the case of Thatcher's Britain the most highly anticipated fight, one that also happened to be at the point of production, was the miners' strike. But while the miners' struggle ended in defeat, a more unlikely one, one not at the point of production—the poll tax riots—managed to have a far greater impact on Thatcher's regime. The strength of the social reproduction framework lies in its ability to understand capitalism as a unitary system where production and reproduction may be spatially separated but are in reality organically conjoined. As Miriam Glucksman put it, the “necessity for analyzing each pole in its own right does not detract from the fact that the distinctness of each can be fully understood only in its relation to each other and to the overall structure that comprises both.”⁴⁷ As we seek to rebuild and strengthen our organs of resistance against the neoliberal order—whether they are trade unions or revolutionary Marxist organizations—we should bear in mind this concord between production and reproduction. The Chicago Teachers Union's (CTU) model of social justice unionism is inspiring and worthy of replication precisely because it tries to apply this insight in practice. The CTU strike was not merely a struggle for better working conditions for the members of the CTU. The strike was built by linking the wider issues *outside* the workplace—racist school-closure policy, the economic condition of the students and their families, urban history—to the issues *within* the workplace, such as wages and benefits for the teachers.⁴⁸

Our fight for rape crisis centers near our homes, thus, cannot be separated from our defense of public services to facilitate social provisioning or our battle for better wages and reproductive justice. But the final victory for gender justice will be won when we rebel against the fundamental tyranny of capital to take our labor in order to make profits. That battle may be sparked anywhere in society, but it will have to be won at the point of production, in our workplaces and at the barricades where uniting the strands of our previous struggles we can take that famous leap “in the open air of history.”⁴⁹

Tithi Bhattacharya

Notes

1. I would like to thank Snehal Shingavi, Ashley Smith, and Bill V. Mullen for their comments on an early draft of this essay.
2. Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism* (London: Verso, 2013), 218.
3. Ibid.
4. Neil Davidson, “The Neoliberal Era in Britain: Historical Developments and Current Perspectives,” *International Socialism* 139, July 2013.
5. Ibid.
6. Quoted in Davidson.
7. Meg Luxton, “Feminist Political Economy in Canada and the Politics of Social Reproduction,” in Kate Bezanson, Meg Luxton eds, *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-Liberalism* (Toronto: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006), 36.

8. Lise Vogel, "Domestic Labor Revisited," *Science and Society*, Vol. 64, no. 2, Summer 2000, 156.
9. Luxton, 37.
10. Davidson.
11. Sarah Boseley, "One in Three Women Suffers Violence, Global Study Finds," [Guardian](#) (UK), June 20, 2013.
12. Sadie Robinson, "What Causes Rape?" *Socialist Worker* [UK], June 7, 2011.
13. I am grateful to Phil Gasper and Colin Barker for putting this point succinctly to me in our discussion.
14. Claire M. Renzetti with contributions from Vivian M. Larkin, "Economic Stress and Domestic Violence," Report from the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, 2011.
15. Stephanie Armour, "Foreclosures Take an Emotional Toll on Many Homeowners," *USA Today*, May 16, 2008.
16. Christina Hoag, "6 Die in Family Murder-Suicide in Los Angeles," *USA Today*, October 7, 2008. The *New York Times* reported the story with the apt title "Man Kills His Family and Himself Over Market." See Rebecca Cathcart, "Man Kills His Family and Himself Over Market," *New York Times*, October 7, 2008.
17. [Kate Bezanson](#) and [Meg Luxton](#), eds., *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-Liberalism* (Toronto: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 5.
18. 2003 World Bank Report cited in Marianne Fay, Lorena Cohan, and Karla McEvoy, "Public Social Safety Nets and the Urban Poor," in Marianne Fay ed., *The Urban Poor in Latin America* (Washington D.C.: The World Bank, 2005), 244.
19. [Susan Thistle](#), *From Marriage to the Market: The Transformation of Women's Lives and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 110, 112.
20. Andrew MacAskil, "Delhi Rape Victims Are to Blame, Defendants' Lawyer Says," *Bloomberg News*, January 10, 2013. Also see my report of this case in *Socialist Worker* [US], January 10, 2013.
21. [Kate Raworth](#), *Trading Away Our Rights: Women Working in Global Supply Chains* (Oxford: Oxfam Publishing, 2004), 28.
22. David McNally, *Global Slump: the Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance* (Oakland: PM Press, 2011), 37.
23. [Alice H. Amsden](#), *Asia's Next Giant: South Korea and Late Industrialization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 204.
24. For more details, see Jacqui True, *The Political Economy of Violence Against Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
25. Regina G. M. Karega, *Violence Against Women in the Workplace in Kenya: Assessment of Workplace Sexual Harassment in the Commercial, Agriculture and Textile Manufacturing Sectors in Kenya*, International Labor Rights Fund, 2002.

26. [Maria Patricia Fernandez-Kelly](#), *For We Are Sold, I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico's Frontier* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 141.
27. Hester Eisenstein, *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women's Labor and Ideas to Exploit the World* (Boulder, London: Paradigm, Publishers, 2009), 151.
28. "Waking Up From The American Dream," *Business Week*, November 30, 2003.
29. Leslie Salzinger, *Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 10.
30. Deepa Narayan et al., *Voices of the Poor Crying Out for Change*, Published by Oxford University Press for the World Bank (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 110.
31. *Ibid.*, 123.
32. *Marx and Engels Selected Works in One Volume* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), 96.
33. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 50.
34. "Let's Admit It: Honor Killings in the West is by Muslims," op-ed, *Israel National News*, February 3, 2012.
35. Fareena Alam, "Take the Honor out of Killing," *Guardian* (UK), July 6, 2004.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Kate Kelland, "Study links British recession to 1,000 suicides," Reuters, August 15, 2012.
38. Alice Park, "Why the Recession May Trigger More Depression Among Men" *Time Magazine*, March 1, 2011.
39. Francine Deutsch, *Halving It All: How Equally Shared Parenting Works* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 180-94.
40. B. Harrington, F. Van Deusen, and B. Humberd, *The New Dad: Caring, Committed and Conflicted* (Chestnut Hill: MS: Boston College Center for Work and Family, 2011).
41. "The Changing Role of the Modern Day Father," *Report of the American Psychological Association*, 2012.
42. Joan C. Williams, *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 59, 158.
43. *Ibid.*
44. Paul Volcker who introduced neoliberal economic policies in the United States made clear this connection between breaking union power and neoliberalism when he said "the most important single action of the [Reagan] administration in helping the anti-inflation fight was defeating the air traffic controllers' strike," quoted in McNally, 35.
45. For a critique of Hardt and Negri, see Tom Lewis, "Empire Strikes Out," *International Socialist Review* 24, 2002.

46. David Harvey perhaps has the most creative and enthusiastic analysis of these movements against “dispossession.” See especially his recent *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2013). For a sympathetic critique of Harvey’s work, listen to Geoff Bailey, “Accumulation by Dispossession,” audio recording at WeAreMany.org.

47. Miriam Glucksman, *Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter-War Britain* (London: Routledge, 1990), 258.

48. For details, see Lee Sustar, *Striking Back in Chicago: How Teachers Took on City Hall and Pushed Back Education “Reform.”* Forthcoming from Haymarket Books.

49. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 261.

P.S.

• ISR Issue #91: Features. Winter 2013-14:

<https://isreview.org/issue/91/explaining-gender-violence-neoliberal-era>

Tithi Bhattacharya is a professor of South Asian History at Purdue University She is the author of *The Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education, and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal* (Oxford University Press, 2005) and a long time activist for Palestinian justice. She writes extensively on Marxist theory, gender, and the politics of Islamophobia. Her work has been published in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, *South Asia Research*, *Electronic Intifada*, *Jacobin*, *Salon.com* and the *New Left Review*. She is on the editorial board of the *International Socialist Review*.

Her articles published by ISR:

<https://isreview.org/person/tithi-bhattacharya>