

# Networked Constraints: Feminist Theory and the Architecture of Women's Marginality

## A Synthetic Review of Foundational and Contemporary Feminist Scholarship

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### Abstract-

The set of works written by authors such as Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, P. Sainath, Vandana Shiva, Rayna Rapp, Betsy Hartmann, Caroline Criado Perez, Nivedita Menon, Angela Davis, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Rosalind Gill, Radhika Gajjala, Judy Wajcman, Sheryl Sandberg, Sallie Krawcheck, and Melinda Gates constitute an essential intellectual foundation for grasping the recognition, theorization, and presence of the key barriers that confront women in today's world. The writings of these individuals document the emergence of no fewer than nine persistent barriers, namely, structural dispossession, economic precarity, cultural orthodoxy, reproductive control, political exclusion, symbolic erasure, technological marginality, institutional bias, and intersectional discrimination. Early literary and activist scholarship was able to reframe the notion of dispossession, livelihood insecurity, and cultural proscription into structural barriers against the marginalised status of women. The fields of feminist anthropology and biopolitical theory were crucial in exposing the methods used to regulate and exploit women's bodies in society. Later, political and intersectional scholarship brought to light the structural basis of exclusion inherent in governmental forms. In contrast, media and technology scholarship helped explain the nature of the semiotic and computational structures underlying symbolic and technological discrimination. Modern leadership and development writing has further pointed.

Keywords: Structural Dispossession, Biopolitical Governance, Intersectional Exclusion, Symbolic Erasure, Epistemic Marginality.

### INTRODUCTION

Neither theory nor any single action could ever answer the question of what prevented women from exercising their civic, economic, and political rights. Each generation has produced its understanding of the problem, its own map of oppression, and its own language of liberation. The difference in the body of literature by feminist and activist scholars discussed in this paper lies in the fact that they have rejected the convenient myth of reducing women's subjugation to just one line of discrimination. Together, works by Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, P. Sainath, Vandana Shiva, Rayna Rapp, Betsy Hartmann, Caroline Criado Perez, Nivedita Menon, Angela Davis, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Rosalind Gill, Radhika Gajjala, Judy Wajcman, Sheryl Sandberg, Sallie Krawcheck, and Melinda Gates represent a unique intellectual treasure with its wide range and deep critical perspective embracing literature, investigative journalism, anthropology, political science, media studies, technology criticism, business memoir, and development studies.

In this paper, I will show that despite their differences in terms of genre and geography, there are nine constant obstacles to which attention should be paid, namely: structural dispossession, economic precariousness, cultural orthodoxy, reproductive regulation, political marginalisation, symbolic annihilation, technological obsolescence, institutional biases, and intersectional discrimination. These constraints are not separate issues that have been overcome step by step but rather constitute the complex and flexible structure of oppression. The key claim of my review is that today feminism requires an approach grounded in multiple sites, in which intervention across material, bodily, political, symbolic, and technological realms is necessary to address new dimensions of problems that were discussed decades ago.

The discussion is structured around charting the historical evolution of these nine constraints through four major waves of academic and activist interventions, followed by consideration of how they have taken on new forms of urgency amid processes of digitisation, climate precarity, and neoliberal governance.

## 2. Structural Foundations: Dispossession, Precarity, and Cultural Interdiction

The earliest and arguably most foundational work within the archive analysed here came from literature and journalism concerned with the experiences of women who were marginalised by processes of postcolonial development. In her fiction, Mahasweta Devi presents a structural anatomy of dispossession through works such as 'Hajar Churashir Maa' and the stories featured in 'Breast Stories.' The women in Devi's work are not simply poor. Still, they are systematically stripped of their land, their labour, their bodies, and their names by virtue of the workings of the caste system, the legacy of colonialism, and the laws that govern patriarchal kinship. Devi argues that the female body must be considered the first site of primitive accumulation; it is the space where excesses are taken, social reproduction occurs unpaid, and where punishment takes place when social codes are breached.

Roy's political essays take this kind of structural analysis further into the realm of large-scale development. According to Roy, in 'The Greater Common Good' and the essays in her book 'Capitalism: A Ghost Story', development such as dams, special economic zones, and mining projects affect women much more than men, not only because many women are living in the area but because of the gendered structure of labour which means that women are the main caretakers of water, forests, and common lands that get affected by development activities. In Roy's view, development is the largest seizure of assets from the subsistence economy of rural and tribal women to corporations and the State, and this seizure is racist, casteist, and sexist through and through.

The work of P. Sainath through his investigative journalism in *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* supports this understanding with empirical details. The effects of drought, indebtedness, and farmer suicides in the Vidarbha area of Maharashtra impact women more than anyone else because they have to bear the brunt of the economic crisis caused by the men in their households, because they become debtors but not landowners and because they do not benefit from any of the schemes of government aid meant to help all farmers. Women are the last to eat, the first to drop out of school, and are the most prone to distress labour.

The theoretical approach Vandana Shiva uses in the context of ecofeminism can be seen as providing an analytical framework for the empirical examples of oppression above. According to Shiva, the Western development model represents maldevelopment in that it reduces women and nature to mere commodities to be managed for productive purposes. In her understanding, the phenomenon she calls 'feminisation of subsistence' involves making women responsible for subsistence under conditions of poverty and ecological degradation, while preventing them from having a political voice against these conditions. The cultural orthodoxy discussed by Shiva does not represent tradition; rather, it refers to a socially constructed ideology that naturalises women's subordination to the subsistence sphere and prevents them from claiming land, credit, and political voice.

## 3. Body Politics: Reproductive Control and Biopolitical Governance

While the first group of texts can be said to describe the structural mechanisms behind women's marginalisation, the second set shifts focus from structure to body, the site of political control par excellence. In her book 'Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: The Social Impact of Amniocentesis in America', Rayna Rapp initiates the field of feminist anthropology of reproductive technology, which is equally critical of a technophobic approach to developing new reproductive technologies as it is of uncritically celebrating such developments. According to Rapp, the practice of amniocentesis, that is, prenatal genetic testing, should not be considered merely as another medical technique because it is simultaneously a means of stratifying reproduction: affluent, well-educated women have access to genetic information which allows them to make decisions regarding reproduction while poor, immigrant, and marginalized racial groups are subject to such technologies within contexts of inadequate counseling, linguistic deprivation, and institutional coercion.

Hartmann's 'Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control' locates her biopolitics framework in the context of the international politics of population policies. Hartmann argues that throughout the history of international population programs, from the 1960s' family planning programs of the Cold War era to the conditions attached to structural adjustment programs in the 1980s and 1990s, women's bodies have been used as a tool for realising macroeconomic and geopolitical goals. These programs appropriate the language of reproductive rights to legitimate what is in practice coercive population reduction targeting poor women in the Global South. Hartmann insists on disentangling reproductive rights, understood as the positive freedom to make genuine reproductive choices under

conditions of material security and social support, from population control, understood as the negative regulation of fertility for demographic and economic ends.

Nivedita Menon's 'Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law' extends the biopolitical analysis into the domain of Indian feminist jurisprudence. According to Menon, the feminist approach of employing the law to safeguard the reproductive and sexual autonomy of women is structurally constrained by the fact that the law is a patriarchal construct. Legal reforms that protect women against domestic violence or sexual assault do so within a framework that simultaneously reinforces the heteronormative family as the primary social unit, criminalises consensual nonnormative sexuality, and disciplines women who fail to perform respectable femininity. The law, in Menon's account, is never simply an instrument that feminists can seize and redirect; it is a site of struggle in which feminist gains are always partial, reversible, and potentially reappropriated by conservative projects.

#### **4. Political Architectures: Exclusion, Intersectionality, and Juridical Power**

The third cluster of texts examined here addresses the mechanisms through which women are excluded from formal political and juridical power, and the theoretical frameworks required to understand how that exclusion is organised across multiple axes of difference. Angela Davis's 'Women, Race and Class' remains the foundational text for any analysis of intersectional exclusion in the American context. Davis shows how the abolitionist and suffrage movements of the nineteenth century were structured by a racial hierarchy that privileged the political claims of white middle-class women over those of Black and working-class women, and how this hierarchy reproduced itself in the twentieth-century feminist movement's relative inattention to the issues of reproductive coercion, prison expansion, and labour exploitation that most acutely affected women of colour.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's theoretically extends Davis's historical analysis in 'Feminism Without Borders: Decolonising Theory, Practising Solidarity.' Mohanty's critique of what she calls 'Western feminist discourse' identifies the epistemic violence done when metropolitan feminist frameworks are applied to women in the Global South as though their experience of patriarchy is equivalent to that of Western women, differing only in degree of backwardness. "Mohanty insists that Third World women are not simply 'women plus' a set of additional oppressions; they inhabit a fundamentally different historical and structural position within global capitalism, colonialism, and postcolonial state formation." Her concept of 'epistemic marginality' names the condition of women whose knowledge, values, and political frameworks are systematically devalued and rendered invisible by the dominant terms of feminist theory and development policy alike. Caroline Criado Perez's 'Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men' brings this analysis of epistemic marginality into the contemporary domain of data and design. Criado Perez demonstrates, through an exhaustive catalogue of empirical evidence, that the 'gender data gap,' the systemic absence of sex-disaggregated data across domains from medicine to urban planning to crash-test safety standards, is not a neutral oversight but an institutionalised form of symbolic erasure. If the default human is a man, then everything about women will not be counted, leading to such problems as inadequate medication dosages and city planning that exposes women to violence. In Criado Perez's account, institutional bias is not primarily a matter of individual prejudice but of the structural assumptions embedded in research design, policy formulation, and technological development.

#### **5. Symbolic and Digital Landscapes: Media, Technology, and Algorithmic Governmentality**

The final, and perhaps most contemporary, set of readings considered in this paper focuses on the symbolic and technological systems that reproduce and intensify the subjugation of women in media and digital space. The writings of Rosalind Gill on post-feminist media culture, especially her book "Gender and the Media" and her pioneering essays on "post feminism as a sensibility," explore a new ideological structure that at once responds to and limits feminist claims. Postfeminist media culture presents women as empowered, sexually agentic, and free to choose, while simultaneously subjecting them to intensified surveillance of their bodies, policing of their behaviour, and disciplining of their desires. The feminist critique of sexism is absorbed and neutralised by a culture that treats female empowerment as a commodity, selling it back to women as individualised lifestyle choice rather than collective political project.

The article by Gajjala titled "Digital Diasporas: Labour and Affect in Gendered Indian Digital Publics" follows the concept of technology-based marginalisation with reference to a marginalised group of women from the Global South, who engage with digital media platforms that provide both opportunities and exploitation.

It is evident from reading the article "Digital Diasporas: Labour and Affect in Gendered Indian Digital Publics" written by Gajjala that women's digital labour, which includes microwork and affective work performed via the Internet, is undervalued and exploited when women engage in platform use where there are no rights for workers, no data rights, and no means of collective action on behalf of workers. In this context, digital inclusion should be understood as digital dispossession, as participation in such a platform implies a business model that profits from user-generated content and data.

In her book *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism*, Wajcman introduces a concept that helps us understand the transformation of women's time associated with the emergence of digital technology. Instead of making labour less time-consuming, as one might expect, digitalisation expanded the work and care work performed by women, complicating their private lives.

## 6. Organisational Bias and Limitations of Corporate Feminism

This is the final set of readings that examines institutional biases and inequalities in organisations and markets, as well as the limitations of the approach known as 'corporate feminism' or 'liberal feminism' in addressing such problems.

The seminal work in this area would undoubtedly be 'Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead' by Sheryl Sandberg, one of the main authors on what has become known as 'corporate feminism' or 'liberal feminism.' Sandberg's theory, in essence, suggests that the reason why women are so poorly represented within corporations in terms of leadership is largely because of their own 'holding themselves back', of taking up available opportunities or refusing to do so and choosing to sit on the sidelines of power rather than at its core.

In addition to corporate feminism, Sallie Krawcheck, in her book titled "Own It: The Power of Women at Work", follows Sheryl Sandberg's perspective on women in business and the economy. Specifically, the author argues that women's unique ability to assess risks, build relationships, and work collaboratively to solve problems makes them invaluable assets to financial institutions and companies; thus, excluding women from corporate structures is an irrational, inefficient use of human capital. This narrative employs language of business case feminism, suggesting that gender equality pays off and corporations that do not harness the potential of women are missing out on a lot of money.

Following corporate feminist arguments into the realm of international development, Melinda Gates provides a technocratic framework based on philanthropic capitalism in her book titled "The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World". Specifically, the author suggests investing in health, education, and women's agency to reap substantial dividends and improve the lives of all community members.

Academics such as Angela Davis and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have done considerable theorising on the deficiencies of the corporate and liberal feminist approaches. The first flaw highlighted by scholars is that these feminisms do not target the root cause but rather the symptoms. This is seen when corporate and liberal feminists propose solutions that only seek to integrate women into the current system of power without asking about the reasons behind these structures of power and oppression. This is evident when Sandberg talks about women leaning into corporate structures, as though the values, pace, and incentive systems of late capitalism were inherently desirable ways for women to achieve freedom. Why would the corporate system be one in which those in power were those who had the luxury of externalising their caring duties? What was wrong with the rapid pace of corporate labour that made it inconsistent with the temporality of parenting and civic duties? How did the accumulation of corporate power relate to a feminist agenda?

## 7. Contemporary Intensifications: Algorithmic Bias, Climate Precarity, and Neoliberal Governance

The nine constraints outlined in the body of knowledge here have not remained the same; instead, they have been significantly intensified and reconfigured in light of the challenges posed by the contemporary conjuncture. Technological developments such as digitisation and platform capitalism have introduced novel dimensions of technological marginality, symbolic erasure, and economic precarity that go beyond the simple repetition of constraints noted by prior researchers and instead represent transformations of those constraints. Algorithms, from those used in recruiting processes and content moderation systems that amplify gender bias to those used for credit scores, punishing

the career interruptions resulting from caring labour, are the new form of automated institutionalised bias that is far less visible, less contestable, and far more prevalent globally than any bureaucratic one mentioned by Criado Perez or Wajcman.

Climate change, in turn, marks a second vector of contemporary intensification. As Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist theory predicts, ecological degradation will have its greatest impact on women in subsistence economies, who are most immediately dependent on the commons. The intensification of climate-induced migration, agricultural decline, and water scarcity in the Global South places a greater burden on women, who are primary producers of social reproduction within an ecology of scarcity, while marginalising them from international institutions responsible for negotiating climate solutions. The gender data gap outlined by Criado Perez reappears in climate data: the vulnerabilities of women to climate disasters and food and climate migration are underreported and underrepresented.

Neoliberal forms of governance can be considered a third mode of intensification, through the withdrawal of resources from public services, the deregulation of the labour market, and the privatisation of social reproduction. The contraction of public health systems, childcare, eldercare, and welfare states shifts the burden of social reproduction from public budgets to private homes, and, more specifically, to women in those homes. The defunding of social reproduction is not felt by its recipients as 'politics' at all, but rather as the stresses of time poverty and the fatigue of the 'second shift' identified by Hochschild. Wajcman's temporal politics thus takes on new significance in this context, since the compression and intensification of women's time through digital capitalism and neoliberalism are not unintended side effects of modernity but rather necessary processes within modernity's political economy.

## 8. Towards a Multi-Sited Feminist Strategy

The overarching significance of approaching these texts from this combined perspective is that no single-axis approach to feminism can do justice to the interconnected web of constraints described here. Any approach that focuses on economic disempowerment without tackling the issue of biopolitical control over women's bodies will ensure that even if property rights are granted, the lives of women's bodies will continue to be controlled via biopolitics. Any approach that focuses on reproductive rights without addressing the ideological constraints of media and technology will end up having its gains nullified through the rise of post feminism that turns feminist empowerment into something that commodifies women further and increases their subjugation in the form of bodily surveillance. Finally, any approach that focuses on political exclusion without addressing issues like racism, casteism, and classism will only produce elitist politics.

The total of what is being asked of us in all these texts, therefore, is an intervention that takes place in multiple sites, namely in the material, corporeal, political, symbolic, and technological domains. At the material level, what is needed is an attack on land tenure, access to credit, labour laws, and public expenditure systems that generate structural dispossession and precariousness. At the corporeal level, it is a defence of reproductive rights and an assault upon the regimes of biopolitics, from demographic management through population control policies, to genetic engineering of fetuses and prenatal selection based upon gender, that exploit women's bodies for political-economic purposes. At the political level, we need to create new political formations that centre the experiences of women at the intersection of multiple oppressions and challenge the juridical systems that confine feminist gains in patriarchal forms. At the symbolic level, we need to fight against the postfeminist culture industries that turn feminist empowerment into spectacle and close the gendered information gaps that exclude women from policymaking and design.

However, the texts analysed in this paper do not provide a common program for this kind of approach. They differ in the importance they assign to various constraints, the feasibility of operating within institutions and through their transformation, and the place of feminist politics within a broader emancipation agenda. Still, their differences are productive because they highlight the rifts that need to be acknowledged to develop a credible feminist politics, while also refusing the comforting illusion of solving everything once and for all.

## 9. Conclusion

The intellectual archive considered in this paper spans a broad range, from literary fiction to corporate memoir, from investigative journalism to biopolitical theory, and from ecofeminist philosophy to platform studies. This diversity is not necessarily a flaw; rather, it is a virtue, as it captures the multifaceted nature of the conditions that constrain women's lives across places, times, and axes of social difference. Reading these sources together, this paper suggests that there are nine persistent constraints- structural dispossession, economic insecurity, cultural orthodoxy, reproductive control, political disenfranchisement, symbolic effacement, technological marginalisation, institutional bias, and intersectional discrimination – that constitute an interlocking architecture of marginality.

The current period is not an age in which these constraints are being surmounted; rather, it is one in which they are being intensified and reconfigured by digitisation, global warming, and neoliberal governmentality. The issues originally outlined by Mahasweta Devi and Angela Davis are today replicated on an algorithmic scale; the dispossession described by P. Sainath and Vandana Shiva is today exacerbated by ecological devastation caused by climate change; the systemic inequalities analysed by Caroline Criado Perez and Judy Wajcman have been embedded in technological processes that enable us to gain access to jobs, loans, health services, and political discourse. To read the archive from start to finish is not to traverse from issue to resolution; rather, it is to travel from identification to re-identification, from identifying a constraint in one context to its transformation in another.

What these narratives have taught us about the process of emancipation is certainly not fatalism, but strategic complexity. What emancipation requires, according to this set of texts, is complex because emancipation is a process, an ongoing struggle that takes place on various fronts. That such strategic complexity should emerge as a political insight in its own right represents no small accomplishment; it took decades of struggles, both scholarly and activist, for feminism to move beyond a single-axis politics. The challenge ahead is to turn that strategic complexity into effective action against the network structure of oppression in the contemporary world.

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