

# **BEYOND “LEAN IN”: TOWARD A FEMINISM FOR THE 99%**

*Nancy Fraser*



**26th J.P.Naik Memorial Lecture**



**Centre for Women's Development Studies**  
(An autonomous research institute supported by the  
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# WHAT THE TIMES DEMAND: FOR A FEMINISM FOR THE 99%

Nancy Fraser<sup>1</sup>

Feminist activism is again on the rise. From Ireland to Poland to Argentina to India, militant struggles are exploding across the globe. The targets of protest include violence against women and privatization of water, sexual harassment and restrictions on reproductive freedom, social services cutbacks and poverty-level wages, among many others. Highly sensitive to class and race, this outburst of feminist radicalism is a far cry from the liberal feminism that has represented the public face of our movement for several decades. Whereas the latter represents the feminism of the professional-managerial stratum who seek to crack the glass ceiling, the new feminist militancy speaks for the vast majority of women who remain stuck in the basement, left to sweep up the shards. Potentially, at least, it is feminism for the 99%.

This lecture aims to further the development of this sort of feminism. Its premise is the need for a course correction in feminist activism: from a corporate feminism that has served as an ally of, and alibi for, neoliberalism to a feminism for the 99%. It represents a coda of sorts to the forthcoming pamphlet, *Feminism for the 99%*:

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*A Manifesto*, which I have co-authored with Cinzia Arruzza and Tithi Bhattacharya. The Manifesto makes the case for this sort of feminism, elaborates its content and vision. Here, I undertake to describe the context in which it is gestating—and thus to explain why a feminism for the 99% must be anti-capitalist.

Feminism for the 99% is emerging in a specific historical conjuncture. The word that best names this conjuncture is *crisis*. Not in the loose and obvious sense that things are bad—a judgment amply attested by multiple wars, global warming, declining living standards, rising inequality, mounting stress on families and communities, intensified racial and gender oppression, mass production of refugees and massive scapegoating of migrants, proliferation of authoritarian movements and brutal regimes. The sheer fact of these calamities, and of the suffering bound up with them, is horrific beyond any doubt. But what justifies the use of the term “crisis” is something more: the numerous harms we experience today are neither mutually unrelated nor the products of chance. They stem, rather, from the societal system that underlies all of them—a system that generates them not accidentally, but as a matter of course, by virtue of its constitutive dynamics.

That social system is *capitalism*, which in its present form is globalizing, financialized, and neoliberal. For systemic reasons, grounded in its own deep-seated contradictions, this form of capitalist society is running amok—propagating massive miseries on a global scale. Not confined to any single region or sector of social life, its dysfunctions metastasize throughout the entire landscape—engulfing economy, ecology, politics and social reproduction, devastating rural communities and mega-cities, upending governance at every scale, including geopolitics. As the wreckage

mounts, we face a *general crisis of this social system as such*. A product of capitalism's inherent dynamics, this is a crisis that *capitalism* can at best displace, but *cannot solve*. In a word, the crisis is *structural*.

Feminism for the 99% is a response to this structural crisis. But we do not understand it in the usual way. As feminists, we know that capitalism is not just an economic system, but something larger: an institutionalized social order that also encompasses the apparently “non-economic” relations and practices that sustain the official economy. Behind capitalism's official institutions of wage labor, production, exchange, and finance, stand their necessary supports and enabling conditions: families, communities, nature; territorial states, political organizations, and civil societies; and not least of all, massive amounts and multiple forms of unwaged and expropriated labor, including much of the work of social reproduction, still performed largely by women and often uncompensated. These, too, are constitutive elements of capitalist society—and sites of contradiction.

From this enlarged understanding of capitalism follows an enlarged view of capitalist crisis. Without denying its inherent tendency to spawn intermittent market crashes, bankruptcy chains, and mass unemployment, we recognize that capitalism also harbors other, “non-economic” contradictions and crisis tendencies. It contains, for example, an *ecological contradiction*: an inherent tendency to reduce nature to a “tap” dispensing energy and raw materials, on the hand, and to a “sink” for absorbing waste, on the other, both capacities that capital appropriates freely but does not replenish; as a result, capitalist societies are structurally inclined to destabilize the habitats that sustain communities and to destroy the

ecosystems that sustain life. Then, too this social formation houses a *political contradiction*: a built-in tendency to limit the purview of politics, devolving fundamental matters of life and death to the rule of “the markets” and turning state institutions that are supposed to serve the public into capital’s servants; for systemic reasons, therefore, capitalism is disposed to frustrate democratic aspirations, to hollow out rights and defang public powers, to generate brutal repression, endless wars, and crises of governance. Finally, and central for us, capitalist society harbors a *social-reproductive contradiction*: a tendency to commandeer for capital’s benefit as much “free” reproductive labor as possible, without any concern to replenish it; as a result, it periodically gives rise to “crises of care,” which exhaust women, ravage families, and stretch social energies to the breaking point. For us, in other words, capitalist crisis is not only economic, but also ecological, political, and social-reproductive.

Often, of course, capitalism’s crisis tendencies remain more or less latent, afflicting “only” those populations deemed disposable and powerless. But these are not normal times. Today, *all* of capitalism’s contradictions have reached the boiling point; and virtually no one, with the partial exception of the one percent, escapes the impacts of climate change, political dislocation, economic precarity and social-reproductive depletion. The recognition is growing, too, that these catastrophic developments are so deeply intertwined that none can be resolved apart from the others.

Feminism for the 99% aims to address this crisis in its totality. But we take a special interest in the social-reproductive aspect, which is structurally connected to gender asymmetry. Historically,

social reproduction has always been gendered, with the lion's share of responsibility for it assigned to women. But social reproduction assumes a distinctive, hyper-gendered guise under capitalism. Whereas earlier societies knew no sharp division between "economic production" and social reproduction, capitalism systematically split them apart. Treating them as two categorially different forms of social activity, it located "work" and "care" in two distinct institutions and coordinated them in two different ways. Production moved into factories, mines, and offices, where it was considered "economic" and remunerated with cash wages. Reproduction was relegated to a private "domestic sphere," where it was feminized and sentimentalized, performed for the sake of "love," as opposed to money. Or so we were told. In fact, capitalist societies have never located social reproduction exclusively in private households, but have always sited some of it in neighborhoods, grass-roots communities, public institutions, and civil society; and they have long commodified some reproductive labor—although nowhere near as much as today. Nevertheless, unlike previous social formations, capitalism separated economic production from social reproduction. And that division constitutes the principal structural basis for women's subordination in capitalist societies. For feminists, accordingly, there can be no more central issue than the organization of social reproduction.

The crucial point is that *capitalism systematically disavows the costs of social reproduction*. In a society where money is the end-all and be-all, this indispensable activity has been accorded little or no economic value. The capacities available for performing them are taken for granted, treated as free and infinitely available "gifts," which require no attention or replenishment. When the matter is

considered at all, it is assumed that there will always be sufficient energies to produce the laborers and sustain the social connections on which economic production, and society more generally, depend. In fact, however social reproductive capacities are not infinite and can be stretched to the breaking point. When a society simultaneously withdraws public support for social reproduction and conscripts the chief providers of it into long and grueling hours of low paid work, it depletes the very social capacities on which it relies.

This is exactly our situation today. The current, neoliberal form of capitalism is systematically depleting our collective and individual capacities to regenerate human beings and sustain social bonds. This form of capitalism appears at first sight to be breaking down the historic gender division between productive and reproductive labor. Proclaiming the new ideal of “the two-earner family,” it recruits women massively into wage labor across the globe. But this ideal is a fraud; and the labor regime it is supposed to legitimate is anything but liberatory for women. What is presented as emancipation is in fact a system of intensified exploitation and expropriation. It is also an engine of acute social-reproductive crisis.

It is true, of course, that a thin stratum of women derives some gains from neoliberalism, as they enter prestigious professions and the lower rungs of corporate management, although on terms less favorable than those available to the men of their class. What awaits the vast majority, however, is something else: low-paid precarious work—in sweatshops, export processing zones, megacities’ construction industry, corporatized agriculture, and the service sector—where, among other things, poor, racialized and immigrant

women serve fast food and sell cheap stuff at megastores; clean offices, hotel rooms and private homes; empty bedpans in hospital and nursing homes; and care for the families of more privileged strata, often at the expense of, and sometimes far away from, their own.

Some of this work commodifies reproductive labor that was previously performed without pay. But if the effect is to muddy capitalism's historically sharp division between production and reproduction, it is emphatically *not* to emancipate women. On the contrary, nearly all of us are still required to work "the second shift," even as more of our time and energy are appropriated by capital. And of course, the lion's share of women's waged work is decidedly *un*-liberating. Precarious and poorly paid, providing access neither to labor rights nor to social entitlements, it fails as well to afford autonomy, self-realization or the opportunity to acquire and exercise skills. What this work *does* provide, by contrast, is systematic vulnerability to abuse and harassment, both sexual and otherwise.

Equally important, the wages we earn in this regime often do not cover the costs of our own social reproduction, let alone that of our families. Access to the wage of another household member helps, of course, but is still often insufficient. As a result, many of us are forced to work at multiple "McJobs," traveling long distances between them, via expensive, deteriorating, and unsafe means of transport. The number of hours of waged work per household skyrockets, cutting deep into the time available to replenish ourselves, care for our families and friends, and maintain our homes and communities.

Far from a feminist utopia, then, neoliberal capitalism generalizes exploitation. Not just men, but women, too, are forced to sell their labor power piecemeal—and cheaply—in order to live. And that is not all: today’s exploitation is overlaid with expropriation. Refusing to pay the costs of reproducing its own (increasingly feminized) labor force, capital is no longer content to appropriate “only” the surplus value its workers produce over and above their own means of subsistence. In addition, it now drills deep into the bodies, minds and families of those it exploits, extracting not only surplus energies but also those needed for replenishment. Mining social reproduction as a further source of profit, it cuts into bone.

Capital’s assault on social reproduction also proceeds by retrenchment of public social services. In the previous social-democratic (or state-managed) phase of capitalist development, working-classes in wealthy countries won some concessions from capital in the form of state support for social reproduction: pensions, unemployment insurance, child allowances, free public education, and health insurance. The result was no golden age, however: the gains achieved by majority ethnicity workers in the capitalist core rested on some nice-so-nice “hidden abodes”: on women’s dependency through the family wage, on racial/ethnic exclusions from social security, on heteronormative eligibility criteria for social welfare, and on ongoing imperial expropriation in the “Third World.” Nevertheless, they offered partial protection for some from capital’s inherent tendency to cannibalize social reproduction.

Neoliberal financialized capitalism is a different animal altogether. Far from empowering states to stabilize social reproduction through public provision, it authorizes finance capital

to discipline states and publics in the immediate interests of private investors. Demanding public disinvestment from social reproduction, even while conscripting women into paid work, the present regime intensifies the social-reproductive contradiction that is inherent in capitalism.

The weapon of choice is often debt. Finance capital lives off *sovereign debt*, which it uses to outlaw even the mildest forms of social-democratic provision, coercing states to liberalize their economies, open their markets, and impose “austerity” on defenseless populations. Likewise, it proliferates *consumer debt*—from subprime mortgages to credit cards and student loans, from payday loans to micro-credit, all of which it uses to discipline peasants and workers, to keep them subservient on the land and on the job, to ensure that they continue to buy GMO seeds and cheap consumer goods, at levels above what their low wages would otherwise allow. In both ways, the regime sharpens capitalism’s inherent contradiction between the imperative of accumulation and the requirements of social reproduction. Simultaneously demanding increased working hours and retrenched public services, it externalizes carework onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it.

The result is a mad scramble, on the part of women especially, to shoehorn social reproductive responsibilities into the interstices of lives that capital demands be devoted primarily to its accumulation. Typically, this means offloading carework onto less privileged others. Hence, the much-discussed “global care chains,” forged when those who possess the means to do so hire poor, often racialized and/or migrant women to clean their homes and care for their children and aging parents, while they themselves pursue more

lucrative work. But of course, that leaves the low-paid careworker scrambling to meet her own domestic and familial responsibilities, often by transferring them to other, still poorer, women, who in turn must do the same, and on and on, often across great distances.

This scenario fits the gendered strategies of cash-strapped, indebted postcolonial states subjected to “structural adjustment.” Desperate for hard currency, some of these states have actively promoted women’s emigration to perform paid carework abroad for the sake of remittances, while others have courted foreign direct investment by creating export processing zones, often in industries, such as textiles and electronics assembly, that prefer to employ low-paid women workers, who are then subject to rampant labor and sexual violence. In both cases, social reproductive capacities are further squeezed. Far from filling the care gap, the net effect is to displace it—from richer to poorer families, from the Global North to the Global South. The overall result is a new, *dualized* organization of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it and privatized for those who cannot, as some in the second category provide carework in return for (low) wages for those in the first.

All of this adds up to what some call a “crisis of care.” But that expression can easily mislead. In fact, this crisis is structural, part and parcel of the broader general crisis of contemporary capitalism. By no means contingent or accidental, it is the expression, under current conditions, of a tendency to social-reproductive crisis that is inherent in capitalist society,

Given the severity of the current crisis, it is no wonder that struggles over social reproduction have exploded over recent years. Northern feminists often describe their focus as the “balance

between family and work.” But struggles over social reproduction encompass much more—including grass-roots community movements for housing, health care, food security, and an unconditional basic income; struggles for the rights of migrants, domestic workers, and public employees; campaigns to unionize those who perform social service work in for-profit nursing homes, hospitals, and child care centers; struggles for public services such as day care and elder care, for a shorter work week, and for generous paid maternity and parental leave. Taken together, these claims are tantamount to the demand for a massive reorganization of the relation between production and reproduction: for social arrangements that prioritize people’s lives and social connections over production for profit; for a world in which people of every gender, nationality, sexuality, and color combine social-reproductive activities with safe, interesting, well-remunerated, and harassment-free work.

That demand is central to the feminism for the 99%. But it does not stand on its own. Rather, we connect it to others—equally far-reaching and transformative: demands for a new relation to non-human nature, for a new relation between “the political” and “the economic,” and for democratic control over the social surplus we collectively produce. Together, these demands point to an entirely new form of social organization. Nothing less could possibly count as a true, emancipatory resolution of the present crisis.

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