

Gender inequality in neo-liberal times. What new answers does feminism have?

1. Problem context

1.1.

A lot of people **consider feminism as obsolete**: a lot of the overt inequalities (e.g. in juridical status or rights) have disappeared, young women have opportunities to study and develop their talents, postpone the raising of children and fall back on child care and domestic help to develop satisfactory social and professional lives. Because of these 'visible' steps towards equal opportunities for men and women, feminism is seen by many people as a rearguard action, better not to be gotten involved in, especially not if one wants to be taken seriously by one's male colleagues. This view is also shared by a lot of people who hold positions of power in social, political and economic life; they don't think gender as a theme (still) requires special attention or specific efforts. Gender equality may be called a political objective by some authorities (e.g. the EU), the 'implementation' of it in day-to-day politics and management often is not considered a priority – or even meets with resistance because it is merely seen as the private agenda of a small group of women.

1.2.

There is however an unfairness in this line of reasoning. A lot of the changes that have occurred (better access to schooling, to careers, to childcare...) opens more opportunities especially for middle class women to participate more intensively in economic, political and social life. But, as soon as a couple has children, it is still the women (even those belonging to the middle class) who postpone or interrupt their career, or change to part-time jobs in order to take care of the family. Moreover, if middle class women do succeed in developing careers or taking up political mandates, it is because they are no longer confined to the domestic sphere that was reserved for the generations preceding them. In actual practice this means that their domestic tasks are now taken over by *professional* services such as child care centres or ironing workshops, by a cleaning lady or a housekeeper. Now those jobs are usually held by lowly schooled women, who may have a family of their own or even be the head of a single parent family. What the young successful women do not take into account, is that these women don't have the same opportunities to delegate their own care work to professional helpers.

- To begin with, their career choices are extremely limited, and very often they are stuck in jobs where they carry out exactly those traditionally female tasks which the middle class women have 'shaken off'.
- Moreover, feminine sectors of work (related to care work) are usually considered less valuable than traditionally masculine sectors, and thus receive less financial and social rewards. The working conditions and wages of these women usually don't allow them to delegate their own household chores to others; they can't afford to have their ironing or cleaning done by others, to pay for childcare or eat in restaurants.
- As a result, these women hold jobs that offer very few opportunities to improve their social or financial situation, and they remain in the oppressed position that was traditionally held by women. Or even worse, if they are the head of a single parent family, they face the combination of a double job (paid work and domestic work).

The improved social and economical position of middle class women is only possible because poorly schooled women haven't taken over the tasks that used to keep women away from public life. **Gender equality thus threatens to be replaced with class inequality.**

1.3.

An additional complication is that the progress in ‘overt’ equality (in juridical status or rights of women), makes these ‘covert’ forms of discrimination difficult to discern and to fight. Young middle class women believe that if some women these days don’t reach the same status as they or their male colleagues, it is because they don’t fully grab the opportunities that exist for women today. In other words, if there still are differences in the position of men and women, in the opinion of many people this has nothing to do with structural mechanisms or power relations, but it is solely to be attributed to the lack of initiative of the women themselves. **Emancipation is seen as a matter of personal choice, ambition and effort; a situation of oppression therefore can only be ascribed to individual shortcomings.** In the prevailing neo-liberal view, which champions the free initiative of the individual, it turns out that “the public becomes private” again. The prevailing intellectual scheme (tributary to neo-liberalism) that is used to analyse the subordinate position of women, puts the blame for their subordination on the women themselves. Needless to say, this does not contribute to the emancipation of oppressed women, but on the contrary even strengthens their sense of worthlessness.

1.4. So, the challenge that feminism is facing today, is that it has to develop new schemes of analysis to resist this kind of contempt and depreciation. I want to explore the hypothesis that the answer to this challenge resides both in a feminist epistemology and in feminist economics. The ideas offered here are explored and tested in Flora, a Belgian network of organisations that work with lowly schooled women. The Flora team sets up action research projects and exchange of good practices, offers consultancy, develops new tools and methods and invests in advocacy and lobbying for the needs of their member organisations and the women they work with. The ideas that are offered in this paper, are fed by the different projects Flora has set up.

2. Neo-liberalism and epistemology

2.1. Presuppositions of the neo-liberal basic assumption

The analysis of emancipation (or oppression) as the product of the free choice and personal responsibility (or the lack thereof) at first sight seems to have some liberating potential. It focuses on the individual rights and opportunities to make one’s own choices and to draw upon one’s personal capacities, resisting structural or cultural restrictions. However, if one deconstructs this line of argumentation from the perspective of poorly schooled women or women living in poverty, it becomes apparent that it contains in itself a restrictive, normative image that is imposed on women.

Women living in poverty, especially if they are a single parent (in Belgium, about 90% of the single parent families are headed by a woman) don’t usually have many choices to make or many capacities they can build upon to obtain an equal position in society. There are a number of elements that cause this; some examples:

- level of schooling: they often don’t have a diploma, or if they do, it only leads to very limited and poorly paid lines of work. In our society, a person’s capacities are only valued if translated into a professional qualification, and preferably into a diploma.
- financial situation: their day by day struggle to make ends meet and to provide for the basic needs of their family, leaves them no other option than to do what costs the least or what brings in most money. If e.g. living alone leads to a lower tax rate, they will often feel obliged to live separately from their partner.

- lack of mobility; they often don't have a driver's licence, or a car. Sometimes even a motorcycle or public transportation is too expensive for their budget. Especially if they have children that depend on them, it may be very hard for them to leave the house.
- housing: they often live in the poorer quarters of a city or in rural areas where there are few job opportunities and no social and cultural events. Because of gender patterns, this housing situation often has a different impact on men and women. These patterns are established at a young age. Whereas boys often are allowed to hang around in public spaces (on the street or in cafés) where they can meet with friends and experiment with different social roles, girls are called upon at a young age to take care of their family. Within the house, they usually don't have 'a room of their own', where they can explore different social roles or create their own (mental or physical) space.

As a consequence of all this, poorly schooled women do not have the capacity to improve their situation 'on their own initiative'. Poverty, it is generally recognised, is not just a lack of money, but is a complex whole of mechanisms leading to exclusion and oppression in many domains. From a psychological view, these women never have a sense of choice; all they can do is try to 'survive' in the situation they find themselves in. The presuppositions the neo-liberal scheme is based upon, in fact reflect a middle-class perspective. Because these presuppositions structure the way the situation of lowly schooled women is analysed and described ("individual initiative as the source of emancipation"), they also lie at the basis of a judgment about them which further oppresses them ("they are the source of their own problems"). In other words, oppressive mechanisms are in fact already present in the epistemology, in the 'knowledge' that is produced about these women and their situation.

2.2. oppressive epistemology

How does 'epistemological oppression' work? The neo-liberalist adage, that emancipation is just a matter of exerting one's free will as an individual, in fact reflects the position of a certain (middle class) category of women. This view, however, is imposed upon a class of women who in fact do not have the same opportunities. Talking about poverty or oppression while emphasising the responsibility and initiative of the individual (and without attention for structural and cultural limitations) in fact establishes power relations within the production of knowledge. The way emancipation is being defined (and judgments about the situation of women in poverty are being passed) reflects the frame of reference and perspective of the middle class. As it is their (neo-liberal) definition that is imposed upon the women in poverty, one could say that the middle class is the 'source' or 'subject' of knowledge, while the lower class women are being reduced to the 'object' of knowledge. Even if in academic circles attention is given to the specific situation of people in poverty, this does not mean that poor women get more access to the academia themselves or to other places where knowledge is being produced. Needless to say, being reduced to the 'object' of knowledge, being subjected to the 'knowledge' and judgement of others who impose their own frame of reference upon you, is a source of alienation. As a consequence, in order to 'theorize' emancipation, one should first question the power relations implicit in the theory, in the way knowledge is constructed.

2.3. Feminist epistemology

Feminism has to offer resistance against all forms of oppression (of women); in order to avoid epistemological oppression, it therefore has to take as its starting point the perspective (experiences) of the women who are suffering from exclusion. Allowing these women to become the subject of knowledge requires a participatory process of knowledge construction. In order to realise this, a qualitative research phase in which the women themselves are allowed to define (and circumscribe) the notions which will describe their situation, is a

necessary step. In the research projects Flora sets up, a lot of attention is given to participation in the process of knowledge construction. This does not simply mean that women are asked to express their opinion on things, since very often they may have internalised the oppressive, gender blind scheme. The process is usually referred to as 'co-construction of knowledge'.

- In a first phase, a kind of 'gender training' is given, in which the women are made aware of the gender bias in their own way of looking at things. For them it is often an eye opener to describe the different roles men and women take, or the different capacities and opportunities they have to obtain or realise things in life. And it is especially revealing to analyse the hidden mechanisms and power relations that are behind those differences and that determine their situation.
- In a second phase, the women are involved in the gathering of knowledge. This can happen either by letting them respond to some questions individually or by having them discussing the questions in small groups. The staff member who leads the investigation will record and register the findings in a report.
- In a third phase, this report is being presented to the women, so they have the opportunity to comment on the report and keep the control over what is written about them.

Through this process of co-construction of knowledge, the researcher helps these women to analyse their own situation in a different way, both by giving them a gender training and by presenting them the report that was written on the basis of their input. The way the researcher has analysed and ordered the raw material which the women have offered, may be justified by external demands (for example imposed by the authorities who ordered and subsidizes the research). It is important for the women to learn about the way these demands work; it helps them to look at their own situation from a 'political' point of view and to express claims for structural and political measures rather than just individual help. This way the women keep the ownership over what is communicated about them to the authorities, while at the same time learning how to address the political powers in a more effective way.

2.4. An example: Gender in indicators of poverty and social exclusion.

In order to illustrate the relevance of a feminist epistemology for the emancipation of women (especially the poorly schooled), I will briefly describe a European research project in which Flora has participated. The theme of the project was: Gender in indicators for poverty and social exclusion. The idea behind this project was that the indicators which political authorities use to 'measure' poverty and to evaluate the effect of their policies, are often gender blind, doing more justice to the situation of the men than to that of the women.

In a lot of instances, the 'unit' that is taken into account when gathering statistics concerning these indicators, is the family. For example, in order to measure the level of income, the revenues of all the members of the family are added up. The assumption is that the family income is equally divided among all the members of the family. This assumption denies the power relations that often exist within families. Whereas a family may have access to a certain level of income, both partners do not necessarily have the same access to this money. The bank account may be in the name of the man; he may control the amount of money the woman disposes of on a daily basis. Moreover, men often spend their money on things related to their own interests (a car, drinks, a DVD-player, ...) whereas the women have to take care of the costs for the household, school and health care. In other words, taking the family as a unit while measuring indicators of poverty may very well be blind to the real 'poverty' women are facing. Theoretically, a solution to this consists in gathering gendered statistics (taking the individual man or woman as a unit).

However, compiling gendered statistics on existing indicators often is not a sufficient solution to the gender blindness of indicators. In defining an indicator, the class and sex of the researcher (or policy maker) plays a role. For example, in defining an indicator for ‘social exclusion’, a commonly used indicator is the number of contacts a person has outside the family circle in a certain time span. One has social contacts outside the family when going to a café or meeting with friends. So, if for example a person has less than four such ‘contacts’ per month, this will be considered as an indication for social exclusion. One of the results of the ‘gender in indicators of poverty’ research project, was that for the poor women, most contacts outside the family context involve people (friends or acquaintances) who themselves are facing many (poverty related) problems and who are in need of help. So for these women, having more than two such contacts per month is definitely more than they can handle. In other words, the indicator, defined by the government services on the basis of a male (and/or middle class) frame of reference, is actually measuring exactly the opposite of what in the experience of the women marks their situation of poverty and exclusion. It is obvious that this kind of gender blindness is not corrected by just segregating the statistics by sex (gathering separate quantitative data for both sexes) but that a qualitative research is required to correct the epistemological oppression inherent in the prevailing indicators. The women should be given ownership over the way the indicators are defined; the ‘qualities and characteristics’ of the indicators should be the reflection of their experience and frame of reference, and not just that of a dominant (male, middle class) group, causing the indicators to become a source of alienation and the politics that are based upon them a source of oppression.

3. The predominance of a narrow view of economics in the prevailing definition of emancipation

3.1. paid labour – the domain of men – dominates economics

In neo-liberal economics, ‘work’ is synonymous with ‘paid labour’, which in traditional gender relations is part of the role of men (the breadwinner), while the women are confined to the house. The work done in the domestic sphere is not ‘counted’ as work, since it is not included in the calculation of the gross national product, and does not translate in the micro-economical balances of companies or even in the macro-economical budget of a country. In the dominant, middle-class view, emancipation is mainly defined in terms of improving one’s position in the paid labour force. Roads to emancipation are then: getting access to more interesting jobs in which one can earn a good income, developing one’s talents, improving one’s professional situation and acquiring the social status that goes with it. As I said before, this has become possible for many women because the domestic ‘work’ has been delegated to other, usually poorly schooled women.

A lot of the progress young women have made in terms of emancipation is tributary to this narrow, male dominated view of economics. Improving women’s opportunities did not so much challenge the prevailing definition of ‘work’ to include the work women have been doing since generations. Nor did it challenge the lack of recognition for the care work in economics in hopes that a more equal sharing of it between both sexes could be obtained. The strategy has mainly been to include more women in the paid labour force by leaving the other, non-valorised work to others, or by including it in the money economy (paid cleaning services, child care, ironing services, ...). But even then these ‘economic activities’ are poorly rewarded and usually remain typically sectors of women’s employment. **As long as emancipation is thus narrowly defined in terms of monetary economics, it will always imply that the people who assume the necessary tasks of care work, cannot be emancipated, remain in a marginal and disdained position.**

In neo-liberal economics, the aim of economic activity is mainly to generate private profits for the share holders of a company. Companies do not have emancipation or social participation as their objective. On the contrary, in order to increase their profit, they may take measures that ultimately induce some costs for society; they may increase the demands of productivity to such a degree that people develop medical or psychological complaints or lose their jobs. The 'costs' for medical, psychological or social help, however, do not figure in the books of the company. This shows clearly that pursuing social goals (such as equal opportunities for women or the combat of poverty) are at odds with a neo-liberal view on economics in which the increase of 'productivity' is justified only in terms of an increase in private profit. If one counts the costs and benefits of emancipation for society as a whole, not only private prosperity is counted in, but also the well-being of the citizens.

3.2. emancipation versus activation

As long as emancipation is merely based upon a larger participation of women in (neo-liberal) 'economic' activities, there is bound to be a tension between economics and emancipation. For example, in a cleaning company, all tasks implying the use of computers or information technology are delegated to an administrative worker. Administrative workers often also get opportunities to take courses to improve their ICT-skills, whereas the cleaning ladies are given the message that it is not 'worthwhile' for a company to invest in their training or professional development. If they want to develop their talents and capacities, it is even more left to their own private initiative, for example by taking a computer course 'after working hours'. Yet, cultural and structural thresholds will make it even more difficult for these women to have access to this kind of socio-cultural activities. To begin with, in the name of economic efficiency, the women are given the message that it is not interesting for their boss to invest in their personal development, so they also tend to think that social and cultural activities or courses are 'not for people like them'. Moreover, the events or courses on offer are usually defined by schooled, middle class social and cultural workers, and do not necessarily reflect the lived experiences or needs of the women in poverty. And of course, there are also a lot of practical obstacles, such as the price for attendance, transportation and childcare, or the fact that these courses take place in a different neighbourhood from where they live (mobility problem) or that the gender roles within their family do not give them the space to leave their domestic work in order to attend a course or cultural activity.

3.2. the paradox of 'activation'

A lot of government strategies aiming at improving the social position of women in poverty reflect the same narrow economic view on work. In the well-known 'activation' politics, a situation of social exclusion or poverty is addressed by stimulating the people to find paid work. The positive side of this is that these politics move a step beyond the 'welfare' logic, in which people passively receive financial support. The fact that 'active' is reduced to the realm of 'paid work' shows that it still is tributary to the male model of neo-liberal economics. Measures for the 'activation' of unemployed women mainly focus on what can be called 'instrumental' learning processes, i.e. oriented towards functional and economically applicable skills. The focus is on 'qualifying' courses, whereas processes of social and expressive learning are relegated to the domains of 'social and cultural life', domains that to a large degree are unobtainable for them. Here again, the neo-liberal view on 'emancipation' leads to a paradox in that it justifies a kind of oppression of poorly schooled women.

One of the projects of the Flora network has clearly shown this paradoxical effect. Every two years, Flora organises a forum for all the women the member organisations work with. They

all meet in a large public space, like a theatre or a cultural centre. Usually a certain theme is chosen, and after an introduction by a plenary speaker, the women get the opportunity to exchange ideas with each other. For them it is often a unique occasion to get access to a public space and to hear that other women struggle with the same difficulties as they do. This helps them to see that the difficulties they are facing are not merely their 'personal' problems; it helps them to discern structural mechanisms causing similar problems for women in very different situations, and it stimulates their political awareness. The theme of one of the last forums was 'we have talents'; its aim was to make visible and recognise all the capacities these women do have. In one of the preparatory meetings, the groups were asked what talent they would want to give a workshop on to the other groups. Many of the groups reported that when asked, they had not found a single talent they could present to others. It is distressing to see how the lack of recognition of their skills in a money-oriented economy has left its marks on the self-image and self-esteem of the women. After the forum, in which the women of all the participating organisations did give a workshop on some skill or talent, the effect on their self-esteem was considerable, and many of them did find the way to some socio-cultural activity. This shows that the narrowing down of 'work' or 'activation' to 'money generating labour' does not in itself lead to empowerment of poorly schooled women. Emancipation for them also means getting opportunities for social learning (leading to political awareness and social involvement) and for expressive learning (communicating their own view on things, their personal project or field of interest). As long as 'activation politics' are narrowly defined in terms of neo-liberal economics, it will create obstacles to the emancipation and liberation of these women.

3.3. Feminist economics

In order to avoid the paradoxical, oppressive outcomes of the neo-liberal view of emancipation, a broader definition of 'work' or 'activity' is needed. For feminism to maintain its liberating power, it is important to take the different kinds of work a society needs on a political/macro-economic level as the normative perspective. Supporting the (individual) emancipation of middle class women by tacitly letting lowly schooled women take over their care work, is not fair. If emancipation is only possible by 'taking care' of the care work, then in order to think emancipation, one should start from the different kinds of work a society needs to maintain itself. Apart from paid work (or 'productive' work), there is 'reproductive' work (taking care of other generations, raising children, looking after the sick...). Thirdly, 'social' work, i.e. all kinds of citizenship initiatives, volunteer work, participation in all kinds of organisations is a necessary element of a well functioning society (cf. 'Bowling alone'). For people in poverty, access to socio-cultural organisations, clubs, parents' councils, and the like is often very limited. For them, their job may also be their main source of social contacts and social learning. A fourth kind of work relates to the self, to building self-confidence, developing ones capacities, taking time and making space for personal needs and emotions (expressive learning). All four these kinds of work should be valorised, because they are all equally necessary for society. Neo-liberal economics and patriarchy join forces in valorising only the productive work of the 'breadwinner', in disdaining the other kinds of work that are necessary for society, and in letting women take the largest burden of the care work, thus jeopardizing their chances for a satisfactory social position and emancipation. Feminist theory should constantly make this work visible again and demand both that it be recognised and valorised as essential for society (e.g. feminist economics, calculating the value of care work for the gross national product) and that it be shared equally between the sexes. In judging the gender relations within families or within organisations, the four kinds of work should be taken into account, and the equal access of both sexes to all four of them should be evaluated.

Only if the four kinds of work a society needs are recognised and valorised, will women be able to make real choices. In a society where only paid, productive work is valorised, women don't really feel like they have the choice to develop a career or to improve their position, if this will be at the cost of their other kinds of work. Only if the importance and value of the other kinds of work is made visible and recognised will women be in a position where they can negotiate with men about who takes what responsibility within the family.

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Abstract:
Young middle class women often consider feminism obsolete: a lot of the overt inequalities (e.g. in juridical statute or rights) have disappeared, they have opportunities to study and develop their talents, postpone the raising of children and fall back on child care and domestic help to develop satisfactory social and professional lives. However, the lowly schooled women who take over their care work don't have the same opportunities. Their career choices are extremely limited and their working conditions and wages don't allow them to delegate their own household chores to others. Gender equality thus threatens to be paid for with class inequality. Moreover, the progress in 'overt' equality makes these 'covert' forms of discrimination difficult to discern and to fight.
In this contribution a structural analysis of this problem is offered. The answer to this challenge resides both in a feminist epistemology (the co-construction of knowledge with the lowly schooled women) and in feminist economics (taking the different kinds of work a society needs on a political/macro-economic level as the normative perspective from which micro-economic choices of families and companies are evaluated and challenged). The ideas offered here are explored and tested in Flora, a network that works with lowly schooled women.