

In Search of the State? Neoliberalism and the labour question for pan-African feminism

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Introduction

Since the 1970s, informal work has expanded and appeared in new guises in the context of globalisation, neo-liberalism and migration, all of which are highly gendered processes (Chen et al. 2004; ILO 2002b, 2007a). An as yet unsettled question posed within feminist debates is whether women's increased participation in informal economic activity contributes to their empowerment or their impoverishment (Meagher 2010). While economists have tended to see the informal economy as a source of economic opportunity for women in a sphere free of the gender-biased regulations of the formal economy (USAID 2005), more critical feminist and political-economy analyses have argued that the informal economy represents a poverty trap for women, concentrating them in low-skill, low-income activities with little prospect of advancement (Chant and Pedwell 2008; Chen et al 2006; Sassen 2002). Recent ILO research on gender and informal economies, and gender studies of global value chains offer gender analyses of wider global economic change processes, paying attention to informal labour markets, global commodity chains and transnational livelihood networks (Barrientos et al. 2003; Sassen 2002). These studies show that global and national economic changes have not limited women's entry into labour markets, but rather incorporate them on unfavorable terms. Women are pushed into temporary and vulnerable employment within the informal economy, and excluded from more lucrative opportunities opened up by globalisation and liberalisation (Meagher 2010).

Prior to the economic liberalisation policies of the 1980s, the informal sector was often seen in terms of the failure of the formal sector to absorb surplus labour (Tsikata 2009). In the 1970s informal activities were regarded as disengagement from the state, a perspective that highlighted the resilience

and autonomy of traders, and their collective impact as non-state economic actors. This literature addressed the state's withdrawal from economic processes under economic liberalisation (Tsikata 2009; Lourenco-Lindell 2004). In this context growing the formal economy was viewed as a solution to exploitative labour relations observed within the informal economy, and the means through which economic growth and development could occur (Mhone 1996). For decades, many African governments deployed punitive control measures in efforts to discipline the informal sector. However, governments' compliance with neoliberal reforms kept the informal economy expanding, as more and more of the labour force was retrenched from the formal economy. Additionally, the punitive measures and abuse of human rights within the informal economy gave rise to various social movements advocating for informal workers' rights, some of which ended up institutionalising themselves as organisations advocating for informal workers. The decent work campaign popularised by the ILO and transnational organisations, and the opening up of political space in Africa also facilitated informalisation (Mitullah 2010; Olukoshi and Wohlgemuth 1995).

Since the mid 1980s, research and policy have turned towards the informalisation of employment relations. Informalisation has been discussed in the literature as: i) the growth in size of the informal economy which has accompanied the reduction in the size of the formal economy; ii) the systematic changes in labour relations from formalised to more informal arrangements (Tsikata 2009; Chen et al. 2006; Beneria 2001; Sethuraman 1998); and iii) a feature of contemporary economic growth and the global economy (Chen et al. 2006; ILO 2002). While this phenomenon has deep historical roots in many Southern settings (Lindell 2010), the era of economic liberalisation has seen informalisation take on increasingly gendered manifestations.

Drawing from this general context, this paper aims to highlight some of the challenges that labour informalisation poses for feminist politics in Africa. Drawing on feminist political economy, I argue that labour informalisation in the context of neoliberalism poses particular challenges for pan-African feminist emancipatory politics. The paper comprises three parts: the first broadly outlines a policy and discursive framework within which the informal economy in Africa may be understood; the second reviews feminist critiques of labour informalisation in Africa, outlining various feminist demands from a pan-Africanist perspective; the third focuses on the social, cultural

and political constraints which neoliberalism places upon states – critically locating the informalisation of women’s labour in Africa within pan-African feminist debates.

Policy context

Economic policy discussions on informal economy have proceeded within two broad discursive frames: a market-centered discourse, rigidly centered on the needs and interests of the market; and a market-decentred discourse interjected by strong counter-discourses that become visible in moments where the contradictions of capitalism are manifested (Macharia 2007). State functionaries in Africa will more often than not articulate neoliberal discourse that is impervious to counter-discourses, resulting in market-centered policies. When successful critical discourses draw state and public attention to concerns of informal labour and generate policies to mitigate market forces (Ibid: 205). Feminist discourses, by focusing on the rights of women workers, add an additional dimension. Drawing from Macharia (2007) and others, I will discuss these three co-existent discourses.

The globally hegemonic neoliberal discourse dominates African economic policies. Propagated by the Bretton Woods bi- and multi-lateral lending institutions, it is based on the belief that the market is neutral and fair (Macharia 2007). Harvey (2005) critically defines neoliberal ideology as a mask for practices designed to maintain, reconstitute and restore elite class power. Beneria & Roldán’s (1987) treatment of class as a ‘function of gender’ adds an important dimension. Read together, these critiques suggest an understanding of neoliberal ideology as obscuring practices that serve to entrench inequalities based on both gender and class, both oppressions being mutually constitutive (Macharia 2007: 214). The neoliberal discourse on the informal economy is centered on capital, identifying the constraints to creating capital and proposing ways in which pro profit-making conditions may be established, as evident in the World Bank’s *World Development Report* (2005). The Bank identifies the challenges facing microentrepreneurs as including insecure property rights, corruption, policy unpredictability and limited access to finance and public services (WDR, 2005). More specifically the Bank argues that red tape in business registration hampers access to financing and creates distortions (WDR, 2005). This discourse valorises entrepreneurship and micro-enterprises despite the evidence that such activities are precarious

and yield meagre incomes. Solutions offered to enhance the profitability of 'microenterprises' are therefore based on correcting purported distortions (Macharia 2007: 215-6). While in recent times the Bank has sought to demonstrate an awareness of some of the limitations of neoliberal economic policy, its ultimate interest nevertheless remains in the creation of a 'better investment climate' and in capital generation through taxation (Ibid: 217). A significant critique is put forward by heterodox development economists who underscore the fact that economic growth and poverty alleviation cannot be positively correlated. In fact, studies from across the Global South show growth in country indicators of economic performance, correlating with massive increases in self-employment, informalisation and casualisation of work, and accompanied by rising poverty and a fall in real wages, particularly for women workers.¹

Within the labour rights discourse, the International Labour Organization's (ILO) approach to informality is concerned with 'risks to labour' (Macharia 2007: 225). While the neoliberal position necessitates a laissez-faire capitalism with minimal state intervention in the market, the labour rights position calls for protection and insurance of workers. The ILO defines policy issues in terms of 'risk' (see Chen et al, 2001; see also Cohen et al. 2000), that is, general risks stemming from illness, property loss, disability, etc., and work-related risks such as little assurance or guarantee of work, low wages, few worker benefits, unsafe/unhealthy work conditions, insufficient market information, skills, access to existing/emerging market opportunities and career opportunities. The recommendation subsequently is a shift in macroeconomic policies (structures of aggregate demand, prices of inputs and outputs, incentives and subsidies) to favour 'informal' units, operations and products, 'a pragmatic approach to labour legislation balancing concerns for health, safety and security of workers and the broader community with concerns for the financial viability of 'informal' enterprises' (Chen et al, 2001, 2006).

Labour rights discourse at times broadens beyond ILO's risk categories to encompass all issues of concern to workers, highlighting particularly the right of street vendors to unionise and make demands on the state (Macharia 2007: 226). While the 'labour rights' discourse is instrumental in promoting worker interests, particularly for those workers operating within collectives, it is important to consider the relevance of the idea of unions in discussions about 'informal' workers. Labour rights discourse generally addresses unionised

formal sector workers, in employer–employee relationships, and already the subject of international advocacy (Ibid). Self-employed workers are generally not organised, or covered by conventional unions. In addition, conventional unions in Africa have declining membership due to the contraction of formal jobs and inverse expansion of the informal economy. This has implications for the political vibrancy of unions and their ability to successfully bargain on behalf of members. And despite the potential for political action, the unionisation of ‘informal’ workers is difficult, as theory and empirical evidence demonstrate (Ibid). Further, the collectives of workers in more lucrative and male-dominated informal occupations are relatively visible, and have dominated state-convened policy deliberations when compared to street vendors’ collectives. Even street vendor collectives are predominantly male-led and tend to focus on the interests of their male membership. Unionisation that fails to recognise and respond to gender power disparities serve to accentuate inequalities, further marginalising those who are already poorer and less powerful (Macharia 2007: 227).

The feminist discourse on informal work draws attention to issues of concern to women and marginalised groups that arise from inequitable gender power relations at home as well as the workplace (Macharia 2007). For instance it addresses how the lack of recognition and compensation for care work has worked to reproduce gender power hierarchies at the household level (Beneria, 1979), as well as how the replication of domestic labour relations in the workplace disempowers women. Women are concerned about how social-reproductive tasks will be fulfilled when they are absent from the home. Providing materially for children becomes a pre-occupation for women vendors given that almost 50% of them are single, divorced or widowed and have no supplementary support (Macharia 2007). At the workplace, gender-based harassment and discriminatory treatment also become concerns for women workers (Ibid). Homeless market traders and street vendors, the majority of whom are women, also face challenges of personal security and are vulnerable to physical and sexual violence and robberies in the markets and streets at night (Tsikata 2009a; Macharia 2007). Other determinants of harassment and/or discrimination include age, physical ability and citizenship (Macharia 2007), as well as caste, ethnicity, region, training and occupation. Yet feminist discourse encounters strong opposition and is often ignored in the rigidly patriarchal policy-making environment on which capitalism is

structured, and subsumed in mainstream labour rights discourse. A significant body of critical feminist theorisations on the informal economy has articulated elements of the feminist discourse on informal work, and useful positions have emerged out of these critiques which highlight women's complex structural positions that defy normative policy prescriptions towards tackling informalisation.

Feminist perspectives on African labour informalisation

Feminist analyses of the trend towards greater informalisation of women's work have shed significant light on the gendered impacts of liberalisation, while generating some specific challenges. By the mid-1980s, as a result of economic growth, the creation of new areas of work and gender-equity policies, many more women entered the labour force around the world (Sethuraman 1998, in Tsikata 2009b). While some entered professions and management jobs in the formal sector, mainly in public service, they were in the minority. The majority of women were self-employed or in waged work in the informal economy. In some African countries, export processing zones (EPZs) also utilised female labour. The increase in women's labour force participation, however, has not yielded any increases in women's earnings (Ibid). While some scholars have suggested that increases in women's labour force participation results from better education opportunities (Klasen and Woolard 2000), the fact is that there have also been significant increases among women with little or no schooling. Citing other factors in the case of South Africa, Casale (2004) suggests that the increase in female headship of households and the erosion of male income support help explain the significant rise in female labour force participation, arguing that women's labour force participation has thus responded to increases in household joblessness (Casale 2003), a likely response to long-term structural unemployment.

On-going agrarian dispossession in many African countries has placed significant strain on women's productive and reproductive labour, pushing millions of women into tenuous, informal, low-status and low-paying work. Problematising the agrarian situation, Tsikata (2009a) has argued that land tenure and labour have often been discussed separately, resulting in two insufficiently connected bodies of literature which offer useful but partial insights into the implications of gender inequalities in labour relations and resource tenures for women's livelihoods. This disarticulation between

tenure and labour might suggest a hidden gender component in land tenure reform that is characteristic of the feminisation of labour. Stated differently, de-peasantisation does not guarantee proletarianisation or meeting the costs of social reproduction via the labour market due to increasing labour flexibilisation and 'jobless growth'. Indeed, studies in many African countries suggest that women's increased labour force participation is unlikely to be associated with increased mobility in the labour market (Casale and Posel 2002) or with growth in industry – but rather are more to do with the reality of jobless growth. As Razavi (2007, citing Byres [2003]) too observes,

Industrial growth, which has historically been the *sine qua non* of massive poverty reduction by absorbing the labour force that is released from agriculture, has remained anaemic in recent decades in developing countries, with the exception of East Asia. Indeed, one of the remarkable features of structural change in contemporary developing countries has been the disproportionate shift of the labour force from agriculture to 'services' (rather than to industry), which is ominous, as much of this can be thinly disguised survival strategies indicative of a desperate effort to turn to anything that might be available (which happens to fall into the 'services' rubric) (Razavi 2007: 1484).

Further critiques, recognising women's precarity within the informal economy, also note the limitations of measures which target women for poverty reduction. From the 1990s, the World Bank placed considerable emphasis on the notion of 'poverty reduction', which in many African countries, translated into poverty reduction strategies that emphasised the importance of the informal sector for employment creation and economic recovery. Gender-awareness in WB strategies, now finally taking note of women's overwhelming representation within the informal economy, meant targeting rural women and women-headed households, as vehicles for poverty reduction. Yet, as O'Laughlin (1997) argues, the poverty focus reflects acceptance of the terms of structural adjustment programmes under which the state should programmatically seek to reduce its role in social provisioning to address only the poorest of the poor. These are defined as the structurally impoverished – those who cannot enter the market under favourable terms – women, children, the old and the invalid. The literature on women-headed households has been taken up in World Bank-sponsored studies on the social dimensions of adjustment. The institutionalisation of poverty-reduction programmes

raises the question of whether the focus on assistance to women-headed households, to reach the destitute, all the destitute, and only the destitute, locates the debate on women-headed households in Africa within a much broader ideological discussion (O'Laughlin 1997).

Furthermore, as Moore (1994: 26) has pointed out, global patterns of accumulation have meant high levels of unemployment for unskilled workers, a corresponding decline of the male breadwinner role, and discrimination against women both in the labour market and in the organisation of public transfers. Moore poignantly argues that the contemporary debate around the family is really addressing and reshaping people's conceptions of the appropriate roles for the state, the market, public institutions and the family in social provisioning. Structural exclusion from stable, unionised, wage employment of many rural people – women and men, young and old – is not exclusion from the market *per se*. Rural livelihoods are based on patterns of consumption that imply both regular wage income and rural production. The programmatic neoliberalism of international financial institutions denies the state the right to challenge global structures of accumulation and relegates to the family responsibility for dealing with their economic and social consequences. These arguments suggest the critical importance of extricating the debate on poverty and women-headed households in Africa from neo-liberal discourse and its generic policy recommendations on targeting and market-led growth. Both rural poverty and the high incidence of women-headed households derive from exclusionary and polarising structures of accumulation (Moore 1994: 1-2). A more useful analysis would be to understand the ways in which rural communities more broadly, change under neoliberal restructuring of labour. As such, O'Laughlin (1997) argues, we need to ask not *who* to target, but rather, what should be done when capital no longer needs the labour that is pulled from rural households over so many generations (1997: 1).

Feminist critiques also highlight the complex terrain of gender exploitation, and the contradictory impacts of neoliberalism on women. On the one hand, globalisation subjects more women to increasing domination and devalorisation by capital; on the other hand, women often respond to globalisation in interesting ways. Informal jobs can be utilised to craft economic emancipation from patriarchy at home. On the other hand, it is also clear that the women's informal labor does not dismantle androcentric, neoliberal capitalism, but rather

co-opts women (Chatterjee 2012). Still other feminist scholars argue that the equation of “globalisation” with its current neoliberal incarnation discourages attempts to envision alternatives (Jaggar 2001).

This latter question is in my view, a critical one, as it interrogates the possibility of achieving (gender) justice *within* the capitalist system. The question posed is how to challenge the super-exploitation of women’s informalised labour without destroying the informal networks of solidarity and exchange through which African women have responded to their marginalisation under capitalism.² This is much more than survivalism. African women consciously labour out of necessity, but also out of a sense of shared struggle to provide for their communities, undertaken through centuries of dispossession under slavery, colonialism, and under contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberalism redefines the ways in which we understand these forms of labour – devaluing and appropriating women’s associational life for exploitative ends. For history tells us that under colonialism in various African contexts, what might have been considered as women’s informal work in fact comprised of elaborate “life-centered social relations” that included trade and self-help networks among women’s groups and links between women’s groups and other community, church and labour organisations (Brownhill 2009: 206).

The policy challenge here relates as much to quantifying as to remunerating women’s unpaid, informalised labour.³ This point also highlights a major concern regarding the conceptualisation of informal labour: that is, the overwhelming tendency in the literature to view women’s informal sector activities as requiring formal recognition and legislation in order to provide more of the benefits of the formal economy. Since the informal sector has been growing in recent decades in Africa, this suggests that there is a potential trade-off between job creation and employment conditions. This, it is argued, is a particular challenge for policymakers who strive on the one hand to promote economic growth and job creation, and at the same time improve the situation of workers in Africa. This challenge raises a number of questions: should African governments aim to integrate the informal sector into the formal economy in order to extend benefits to this sector, even though this may hamper growth and job creation? Or should they instead focus on deregulating the formal sector to remove the barriers to workers and enterprises from participating in the formal segment of the economy? (Verick

2006: 4). The language of ‘growth’ and ‘entrepreneurship’ as a means of lifting African women out of poverty remains as unconvincing now as it was more than three decades ago when African states began to impose the will of an unjust neoliberal doctrine upon their peoples.

The political and policy implications of such thinking are stark when one considers the immense pressure placed upon African governments under structural adjustments and neoliberal governance regimes. At present, one of the foremost demands of neoliberal capitalism is its preoccupation with legal formalism, which not only undermines associations and labour practices not formally recognised by the law, but ensures that ‘legality’ determines who enters the market and what, more or less overtly, the market itself has come to signify – the very basis of citizenship claims: in Mama’s (2013) words, the privileging of “markets over governments”. This is part of the ideological assault of neoliberalism: the fact that it is through the market (commodification of labour) that individuals become legible to the state as citizens. The state – through its laws – on the one hand acts as the mediator of capital, and on the other, still stands as guarantor of the rights and liberties of its people. This is a contradiction that essentially pits the capitalist state against itself. Upon what basis therefore, do pan-African feminists set out to challenge the exploitative norms of labour informalisation given that it is through the (capitalist) state that the disenfranchising effects of neoliberalism have ‘trickled down’ to the people? What is the basis of expecting the capitalist state to formalise women’s labour rights *in the interests of women*? It is this and other questions that I briefly explore below in a discussion of the policy thrust of African states under neoliberalism.

Pan-Africanism and neoliberal constraints on state responses to informalisation

Recent years have been marked by a proliferation of studies on neoliberalism, but in spite of its diversity, most of this research discusses its import for the state. Some authors suggest that neoliberalism is characterised by the reduction of the state (Prasad 2006; Haque 2008), whereas others argue that neoliberalism is characterised by the redeployment of the state (Ong 2006; Bayart 2007; Lee and McBride 2007). Some authors present neoliberalism as the decay of an inflexible state, or as the inexorable advance of its right hand, but it is clear that the impact cannot be understood ahistorically, or

acontextually. This in itself requires thinking beyond a Western-centred global view of neoliberal expansion, to consider its variations in diverse African contexts. Two phases of implementation can be distinguished: the first, begun in the 1980s, consisted of adjustment policies that focus on the economy; the second, started in the 1990s, was marked by political adjustments in favour of democratic processes that were supposed to move beyond the failures of structural adjustment programmes of the previous decade (Hilger 2012).

According to the World Bank, neoliberalism requires a 'strong state' (World Bank, quoted in Harrison 2010: 41) because the state is an essential prerequisite to a space of pure competition. Competition requires that the state be properly positioned to correct the natural phenomena that hamper competition (e.g. the creation of monopolies, or price instability). According to the WB, the legitimacy of the state depends on economic growth; economic growth is in turn determined by the ability of the state to shape a framework within which individuals are free to pursue their individual interests, and in a world of competition this should strengthen the state. Competition and maximisation become the organising principles of the state (Hilger 2012). Following this thinking, the neoliberal restructuring undertaken in Africa by the Bretton Woods institutions from the 1980s was massive and unprecedented. Most countries became testing grounds for radical neoliberal policies, and in the 1980s alone, 38 African governments accepted 244 conditional loans from the World Bank and the IMF (Bratton and van de Walle 1997: 132-3); 10 years later, the IMF was still operating in 36 countries (van de Walle 2001: 7).

Neoliberalism's particular (and ongoing) impacts on the continent have been weighty. In many countries, the second wave of neoliberal policies (political liberalisation) imposed by international institutions reinforced the paradox of a state that is both omnipresent and completely absent (Hilger 2012). The state is both more present and visible, but at the same time, more absent and weak, capable of coercion (violence, threats, and intimidation) but incapable of fulfilling its social obligations. The state thereby shows itself to be not an apparatus but a set of processes that are not always linked to institutions, or that, in any case, cannot be reduced to these (Ibid). The changed nature of the state under neoliberalism has had varied and complex manifestations in different contexts in Africa.

Neoliberalism's impacts bear particular implications for the pan-Africanist cultural and political movement, historically concerned with reconstructing

and explaining global relationships from the perspective of Africans. At its inception, pan-Africanism was tied to strong intellectual, labour and other social movements, e.g. student movements, revolutionary movements and literary movements, all of which made pan-Africanism a central thesis in their advocacy (Maoulidi 2009). Neoliberalism's effects have been felt across these movements, and of particular concern in this paper are the alienating features. These have weakened labour movements by disarticulating economic from political questions, and concealing women's structural positions. I turn below to a discussion of specific challenges which neoliberalism poses for states with regards to the labour question, emphasising particular feminist concerns that articulate a pan-Africanist vision.

Firstly, scholarship has shed light on the ways in which neoliberalism has imposed itself as a technology of governance over and above ideology, as the most efficient and rational and pragmatic means of finding solutions to problems (Ferguson 1990). The hegemonic technocratic vocabulary of 'good governance' is articulated on the basis of axioms posed as scientific truth. 'Scientific' capitalism presents itself as the only possible path toward supposedly non-ideological, rational and depoliticised solutions to political situations. Such depoliticisation has contributed in Africa, as elsewhere, to an abandonment of the political dimensions of political and economic debates in favour of a narrow, technicist vocabulary (Ferguson 1990). Recall here, Cabral's (1973) argument that,

The value of culture as an element of resistance to foreign domination lies in the fact that culture is the vigorous manifestation on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated or to be dominated...Like history, or because it is history, culture has as its material base the level of the productive forces and the mode of production (1973: 42).

The depoliticisation that has come about under neoliberalism, I argue, conceals the multiple dimensions of dispossession under capitalism. On one level are the various manifestations of cultural imperialism – the economic, technological and cultural hegemony that industrialised nations sustain at a global level – whose impacts negatively affect African women in particular. The ideology of technological imperialism, for instance, justifies the subjugation of nature, the unscrupulous exploitation of natural resources on the continent, and the erosion of the natural commons on which many

rural livelihoods still depend. Historical accounts of colonialism in countries such as Kenya have shown how the modes of resistance expressed by women were shaped by women's struggles to retain their productive and reproductive autonomy within the male-defined systems of kinship, production and administration (Brownhill 2009). These acts of resistance, which could be defined as *political*, were gradually eroded through colonialists' control and suppression of African communal and subsistence practices. Neoliberalism has continued this immiseration, and from a feminist perspective, its most significant impact lies in the political claims it silences. The paradoxical nature of political liberalisation under neoliberalism is that the set of rights ascribed to women are almost absolutely negated by the economic scarcity and dispossession reproduced under neoliberalism.

Secondly, political decentralisation has often been accompanied by land development and redistribution projects that have strengthened notions of private property and discourses around autochthony (Geschiere 2009). The ability to point to one's autochthonous roots is to assure oneself greater access to economic and social resources (Hilgers 2011b). Discrimination of individuals based on their 'original' belonging has occasionally been codified in the law, as in Ivory Coast and Cameroon, and found violent expression among dispossessed 'indigenous' groups, as in South Africa. Autochthony constitutes a mode of categorisation that historically enabled the identification and administration of populations. Even when it has not been officially incorporated into the law, such discrimination has had a major impact on social relations among citizens and between citizens and state in numerous countries (Hilgers 2012). These impacts extend in material yet invisibilised ways to African women's mobility across borders – mobility which is antagonised by African states bent on enforcing the stringent colonial boundaries which they inherited. The late General Secretary of the Pan-African Movement, Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem, often remarked on this point, observing that no one on the continent embodied the spirit of pan-Africanism as much as African women traders who on a daily basis can be seen crossing invisible borders between states on foot, buying goods on one side, selling them on the other and so on. The point he sought to emphasise was the organic, informal labour forms that remain invisible to policy, and are as such, antagonised by policy. The subalternity he sought to highlight defies any notion of 'migrant-as-subaltern' (Dhawan 2007) – as it rather embodies own-account workers

operating outside of organised collectives and not covered under conventional 'labour rights'. States' enforcement of territorial policies in such cases function to *demobilise* labour. As such, in reflecting on what it means for [women] to turn to the state for emancipation, Brown poses the following questions: How does the nature of the political state transform one's social identity when one turns to the state for political resolution of one's subordination, exclusion, or suffering? What kind of subject is being held out to the state for what kind of redress or redemption (1995: 101)? Even as African feminists turn to the (neoliberal) state in search of answers to these labour questions, and wage a Left-inclined struggle, are we able to account for the illegible of women – critical for mediating gender-progressive politics and sustaining a transformative engagement with the state?

Thirdly, and related to the above point is scholarship documenting the neoliberal turn with a focus on criminalisation and punishment. Comaroff and Comaroff (2006) highlight this question in reference to South Africa, noting what they view as an obsession with law and order in the country and in the postcolony more generally. These authors highlight the obsession with criminality in public discourses hostile to labouring women – prostitutes, hawkers, 'illicit' alcohol brewers – for whom legal formality is not an option in many African countries. Feminist materialist analyses contend that women's labour and sexuality are central to women's oppression within capitalist societies, and unpack patriarchal and capitalist interests in exploiting women's (affective) labour (Luxton 2001: 70). Under neoliberalism, the superficial distinction made between the sphere of cultural oppression and oppressions based on the political economy has proceeded unabated. The result is a lack of sufficient attention to the sex/gender systems which structure the organisation of labour, both in the formal and informal economy. In many societies across Africa, patriarchal norms further reinforce this distinction, mystifying the informalisation of women's labour.

The above critiques illustrate some instances where neoliberalism undermines what Campbell has referred to as the 'pan-Africanism of states' (Campbell 2005: 9). Yet the social costs of neoliberalism have fomented struggles, which highlight its class, gender and other contradictions. These struggles dramatise what might be considered as a form of 'pan-Africanism from below' or a pan-Africanism of the people. As Konings (2011) notes, beyond the multiple trajectories of societies in Africa, the diversity of

neoliberal experiments in the continent could also be explained by the variety of resistances to neoliberalism. Scholars have, for instance, demonstrated the direct correlation between the adoption of structural adjustment programmes and protest movements in Africa (Bratton and van de Walle 1997: 133). Beyond the reforms that largely benefited political elites and the austerity measures that have provoked riots in many countries since the beginning of the 1980s (with a global resurgence since 2008), these protests are also linked to the progressive erosion of governmental authority, perceived as the bearer of new constraints imposed from outside (Hilgers 2012: 90). These worldwide anti-austerity struggles confer an internationalist perspective on the ways in which neoliberalism's onslaught on the working classes ought to be understood and confronted. They furthermore, confound a pan-Africanist politics, which while emphasising Africa's general marginalisation, fails to acknowledge the complexities that implicate the continental elite in the massive dispossession of labouring classes. The extent then, to which resistances approximate and articulate feminist desires and demands on the state is a much more exigent task than the mere representation of women's demands on a continental scale.

Concluding discussion

I have sought to highlight neoliberalism's contradictory systemic tendencies and the challenges these pose for pan-African feminist organising. The homogenising impacts of these are felt in remarkably similar ways across borders, evidenced by the broad features of informal economies that lock women in low-paying, low-skilled, exploitative and temporary forms of work. The paltry incomes women earn in the informal sector cannot be separated from the gendered and sexist exploitation of wage labour in the formal economy. It is the squeeze of wages in the middle-income categories and segmentation there that determines the regimentation and valuation of labour as skilled/unskilled labour, educated/uneducated labour supply. In other words, an upward shift of wage earnings in the informal economy would likely benefit women across the labour market, both formal and informal. The factors that precipitate such a shift, and which feminist demands on African governments ought to reflect, should be structural reforms that radically shift the policies, conditions and institutions that facilitate precarity in the informal economy.

In other words, pan-African feminists are faced with the task of forging solidarity beyond a gendered identification, towards a class solidarity that engages and amplifies various mechanisms of labour organising in recognition of a shared and *systemic* oppression under global capitalism, which manifests also at the level of the household unit. It is from this perspective that it might be possible to hold African states accountable. Feminists have, in this regard, to challenge pan-Africanism's tendency towards the universalisation of oppressions among Africans, of which labouring women form a distinct and numerical majority. Feminists emphasise the links between a global political economy which functions perniciously to undermine the working classes, and implicates the ruling classes, be they of African, European or Asian origin (Naples and Desai, 2003). The greatest test is then the ability of feminists to challenge this highly dispersed global order by forging solidarity with workers' demands as a precondition for progressive pan-African politics.

My discussion has sought to shed light on the ways in which labour informalisation is gendered, with implications for a feminist emancipatory agenda. It highlighted the challenges that working within a normatively defined framework of 'labour rights' presents for pan-African feminist struggles. While feminist claims directed towards states in Africa gained particular salience within the political liberalisation that ushered in democratisation, the separation between the 'political' and the 'economic' under neoliberal orthodoxy constrains interpretations of women's structurally defined positions in the global political economy. Furthermore, the constraints which neoliberalism imposes upon African states are indicative of contradictions inherent in seeking to mediate the marginalisation of labouring women through a pan-Africanism articulated from 'above', given that African states are themselves not neutral actors in the processes that have entrenched immiseration among workers. Yet the centrality of states in pan-Africanist struggles cannot be gainsaid. For feminists, this means stepping back from the valourisation of the state, critically confronting its limitations in the face of global hegemonic powers, and working towards a re-conceptualisation of pan-Africanism which takes seriously the subjective conditions of labour produced under neoliberalism. What would it mean to place human beings before profits?

Endnotes

1. Jayati Ghosh. 2007. Remark made during a discussion session, IDEAS conference in Memory of Guy Mhone on Sustainable Employment Generation in Developing Countries: Current Constraints and Alternative Strategies, January 25-27, in Nairobi, Kenya.
2. Mama (2013) has referred to this often invisible aspect of women's labour as the "quiet power of African women, manifest in extensive subaltern farming, trading and provisioning networks through which African women sustain [...] families, communities and societies".
3. According to the UNDP's "rough estimates" at the global level, if unpaid activities were valued at prevailing wages, they would amount to \$16 trillion or about 70 percent of total world output (\$23 trillion). Of this \$16 trillion, \$11 trillion, or almost 69 percent, represent women's work (UNDP 1995).

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