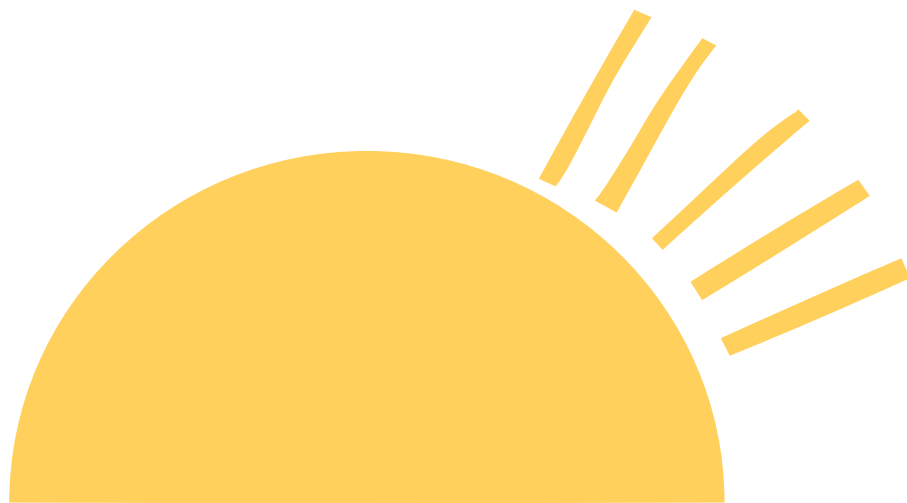




The Political Economy of Sexual Rights: Implications for global advocacy

SRI Conversation Series
2023



Sexual Rights Initiative (SRI) 2023

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Introduction

Sexual rights are profoundly impacted by the interrelated global crises brought on by capitalism through rampant neoliberalism, unchecked extractivism and climate degradation, violent populism and nationalism, soaring inequality within and between states, and entrenched patriarchal, racist, classist and ableist systems of oppression. Despite the core and often repeated tenet that human rights are indivisible and interdependent, rights are mostly understood and articulated in individualistic and decontextualised ways that align with neoliberal conceptions of the market, the individual, the state and global governance. Civil and political rights are privileged over economic, social, and cultural rights in multilateral spaces, which remain dominated by Northern and wealthy states. Thus, it is not uncommon for these states, on the one hand, to advocate for sexual and reproductive rights to be recognised through global agreements while, on the other, they impose aid conditionalities and economic sanctions (or other harmful coercive measures) on states despite the adverse impact these measures have on the realisation of those very rights.

In other instances, **the right to development or other economic rights is articulated in ways that exclude sexual rights.** The capture and deployment of anti-capitalist, decolonial discourse in human rights spaces by populist and conservative states and actors erodes the power of these revolutionary ideologies. In an ever-increasingly polarised world, sexual rights remain a convenient proxy for geopolitical tensions.

Although there has been a lot of research and advocacy addressing the ways in which neoliberal economic policies and practices affect health, such as through sanctions, aid conditionality, illicit financial flows, neoliberal fiscal and monetary policy, privatisation, austerity measures, and debt, there is not enough research or advocacy on how these policies specifically impact sexual rights.

As part of the development of a new ten-year strategy, SRI sought to deepen its analysis of the political economy of sexual rights. Using a participatory approach, SRI convened a series of three conversations that teased out different dimensions of the overarching theme. Each conversation drew in various actors working nationally, regionally, and globally. **The first conversation delved into the historical and contemporary impact of colonialism, imperialism, and occupation on sexual and reproductive rights (SRHR).** It emphasised the intersectionality of economic domination, neocolonialism, and human rights violations, calling for collective rights and extraterritorial obligations. The example of Israel's pinkwashing highlights the need to address root causes and settler colonialism to advance gender rights.

Conversation two explored the repercussions of coercive economic measures on SRHR at various levels. Normalised in international law, economic coercion disproportionately affects populations, exacerbates inequalities, and undermines cross-movement solidarity. Case studies from Argentina, Sri Lanka, and Egypt illustrated the impact of economic crises, debt distress, and population control policies on marginalised groups, emphasising the interconnectedness of social, economic, political, and sexual rights.

Conversation three focused on global governance under neoliberalism, addressing human rights violations, corporate impunity, and the intertwining of economic and human rights systems. Perspectives from activists across regions underscored the need to challenge corporate capture, advocate for inclusivity, and prioritise human rights and social justice. The overarching message called for reevaluating global governance systems, emphasising a more equitable and rights-based approach.

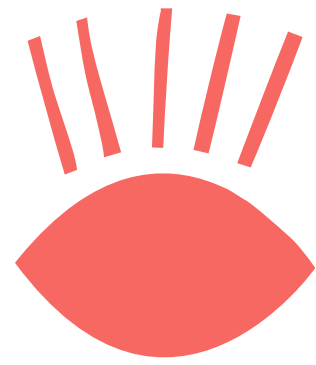
Conversation One:

Legacies and contemporary forms of colonialism, imperialism, and occupation and their impact on sexual and reproductive rights

The recent shift in popular political discourse from ‘postcolonial’ to ‘decolonial’ critique and strategies signals an essential development in our understanding of the impact of historical and ongoing forms of colonialism, imperialism, and occupation. It better captures the insight that these forms of oppression are far from being historical artefacts and that they, in fact, continue to shape and influence contemporary political, economic, and social relations and practices all over the world. There is a growing consensus in anti-colonial movements that a decolonial approach is needed to address the harms caused by both historical colonial policies and processes as well as their thriving afterlives as neocolonial and neo-imperial ideologies and practices.

We are familiar with the mobilisation of individualistic rights discourses by countries of the global North to cast certain non-western societies as premodern and thus to justify military and economic wars against them (historically and now) and, in turn, the often cynical mobilisation of discourses of tradition and culture by non-western societies to deny some groups of people, and women across all groups, fundamental rights to bodily autonomy. With the exception of such manipulation of human rights discourses and agreements, sexual rights are seldom seen to have a relation to historical and contemporary forms of colonialism, imperialism, and occupation even though the realisation of all human rights, including sexual rights, is profoundly and negatively affected by these forms of ongoing domination and oppression.

Thus, countries impoverished through direct colonial rule often retain colonial-era laws or enact further unjust laws that disenfranchise certain groups of people; the criminalisation of sex work, abortion, and homosexual conduct in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean is one example of the lingering effects of colonial-era discrimination dressed up as modern morality. In addition to direct colonial legacies that are adopted by the governments of independent countries as a strategy for oppressing marginalised communities, neo-imperial trade policies, bilateral trade relations between coloniser and colonised countries, and multilateral trade and financial agreements continue to benefit colonising nations in the global North as well as the post-WWII superpower, the United States of America, and a small number of elites from the ex-colonies.



Domination through trade sanctions, aid conditionality, and debt repayment results in economic colonialism and dependence long after countries become politically independent, and this has a direct impact on the ability of states to fulfil their human rights obligations towards their own people, including sexual and reproductive rights contained in global agreements, which global North states monitor without a sense of irony. Under these conditions of economic stress, sexual rights are often among the first to be sacrificed or even decried as western aspirations; regressive gender ideologies and the scapegoating of marginalised populations are also easy tools of populist control when previously colonised countries find themselves unable to meet the needs of their people.

Military intervention, including coups to dislodge democratically elected governments and economic bullying are used to secure access to oil, gas, minerals, and other natural wealth from ex-colonies and from subjugated indigenous areas in wealthy nations, for territorial and strategic advantage, as in the Middle East and East Asia, as well as for direct occupation for ideological, military, and economic dominance, as in the case of Israel's apartheid state. These and other strategies for dominating and extracting wealth from the global South diminish the ability of targeted states to protect the rights of people and, further, create crony leadership and client states whose leadership attaches its loyalty to elites in the global North rather than to the people they swear to serve.

Human rights systems at national, regional, and international levels are often unable or unwilling to address the deleterious effects of unequal political and economic relations on the bulk of the population in the global South and on marginalised peoples within the global North, including indigenous and racialised communities and economic migrants and refugees; it is no surprise that access to sexual and reproductive rights are the most compromised among these communities. In an increasingly polarised and unequal world, an individualistic and decontextualised conception of rights results in an incomplete understanding of how sexual rights remain a convenient proxy for geopolitical tensions.

Summary of the conversation

The discussion was moderated by **Anthea Taderera**, Advocacy Advisor - UPR, Sexual Rights Initiative, and the speakers were **Alisa Lombard**, Lawyer - Class action suit on forced sterilisation in Canada; **Winnet Shamuyarira**, Coordinator of the Guns, Power and Politics: Extractives, Militarisation and VAW, Womin and **Omar Khatib**, activist formerly with Al Qaws.



Framing

Anthea Taderera, Advocacy Advisor - UPR, Sexual Rights Initiative

Rights are embedded in material conditions and geopolitical landscapes. Economic domination in the form of trade sanctions, aid conditionality, debt repayment, etc., results in **neocolonialism and dependence long after political independence** has been achieved and directly **affects states' abilities to fulfil their human rights** (including SRHR) obligations contained in global agreements.

SRI seeks to go beyond liberal conceptions of rights as negative civil and political liberties to affirm the validity and **importance of collective rights and extraterritorial obligations** to allow the full application of rights, including the right to development, self-determination, and permanent sovereignty over natural resources. Economic, social, and cultural rights are not add-ons but fundamental to self-determination.

International law has been disappointing because of its refusal to grapple with the impact of historical and ongoing forms of colonialism, imperialism, and occupation, as well as the self-serving disinterest of the beneficiaries of the status quo in developing equitable systems. A collective aphasia in the international system, or inability to speak about and a **calculated forgetting of race and colonialism**, obfuscates the founding of the modern world and its hierarchical racial order, which elides or rationalises the genocide and dispossession that are central to its being. Racial exclusion and subordination continue to be institutionalised within this system.

Inputs

Winnet Shamuyarira, WOMIN

We can't **speak of extractivism in Africa without talking about our history of colonialism**. In addition to extractivist industries engaged in mining, oil, gas, palm plantations, and fisheries, it is also essential **to consider knowledge extraction and the appropriation of ways of knowing and understanding as forms of extraction**. Such an approach helps us understand our current situation as another scramble for Africa is also underfoot, this time for green energy, even as the older scramble continues.

Women bear the brunt of this exploitation and the crisis that results from the very extractive processes and histories. For example, despite talk of insurgency, it was the discovery of gas in Cabo Delgado in Mozambique that led to **communities being displaced and, people being killed, and the province being militarised**. In this process, women are raped, and people and communities are displaced. The burden of seeking amenities, such as hospitals, and resources, such as food and water, falls on women.

The lack of economic independence means that **outsiders dictate what development means to us**, and colonialism comes disguised as development, which doesn't benefit the communities. Zimbabwe is a classic example of such so-called development. **Granite is mined in Zimbabwe** by Zimbabweans; it is then exported to Italy, where it is processed and then it is **sold as Italian granite at prices that Zimbabweans can't afford**. This kind of exploitation is **happening in the poorest communities** where men work in the mines and women's contribution to the **social reproduction of labour is completely devalued** because the driving mode of capitalist production is the exploitation of nature, resources, and people.

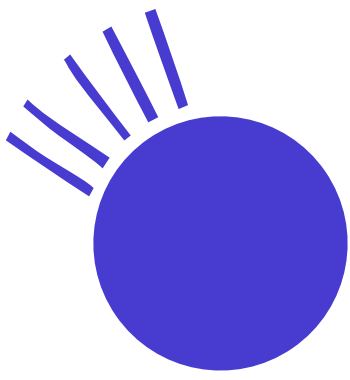
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understanding as forms of extraction**

Further, **states collaborate with mining companies**, which makes it **hard to hold the corporations accountable**. Local remedies are hard to access because of this alliance, and forums such as **SADC are not progressive** enough to deliver justice to women and affected communities.

Patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism come together to exploit people, particularly women and children, or other groups perceived to have less power, who are considered dispensable or surplus. **Capitalism doesn't carry the cost of cleaning up after mining or provide compensation for lost livelihoods**. When communities are devastated, **women have to clean up**; where pits are left uncovered, **women are in danger** when walking for water; livestock care falls on women when men go to work in mines; when husbands and children fall sick from toxins, **the burden of caring for the sick** falls on women too.

Undervalued and unpaid work is both gendered and racialised and poor black women are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Both **economic development and good governance are dictated from the outside**. Inherent in both these systems is the exploitation of resources and people.

We must reclaim indigenous ways of knowing and thinking about development and care, and ways of resisting the colonial state, and our understanding of justice.



Omar Khatib, queer Palestinian activist


There is an urgent need to **convert words into actions/praxis**. We **don't want to improve conditions within any oppressive system** – patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism – but rather to **abolish these systems and the institutions** they produce. Improving these systems doesn't change their unjust nature.

Mainstream or 'pop' activism against Israel's pinkwashing usually concerns itself with proving that Israel's claim of being queer-friendly and progressive is false. In this **liberal trend, decolonial activists try to prove that Israel is racist** and not a democratic haven in a barbaric Middle East by showing how Palestinian queers who flee to Israel are denied papers and safety. Such an approach **keeps us trapped in the game that reproduces settler colonialism** by attempting to make it better.

Whether Israel is a queer haven or not is a secondary discussion.

The main discussion is that the state of **Israel exists through ethnic cleansing and erasure** of Palestinian people. When we deal with this fundamental issue, we will also deal with the issue of sexual and gender rights. A famous park in Tel Aviv that hosts gay pride events has several small 'hills' which are, in fact the rubble of a Palestinian neighbourhood of the town of Jaffa, a modern vibrant city that was destroyed in 1948. Thus, these **pride concerts are built literally on the destruction** of our streets, shops, cinemas, our life and our modernity.

Mainstream or 'pop' activism against Israel's pinkwashing usually concerns itself with proving that Israel's claim of being queer-friendly and progressive is false. [...] Such an approach keeps us trapped in the game that reproduces settler colonialism by attempting to make it better.



Settler colonialism is not one event but a ‘construct’ that’s built over time; it’s constructed on the continuous erasure and displacement of Palestinian life. It makes you live with continuous death.

There is a **class element to queer politics**; queerness and queer politics are concerns in wealthy communities, not in refugee camps, where such issues are seen as luxuries or irrelevant. **Neoliberalism is good in coopting our struggles and framing**, so we have to collectively question and challenge. The system is fragile but smart.

It is essential to have these conversations in the Global South to find links and intersections between struggles. We must refocus on class analysis, which we lost because of neoliberalism and the victory of identity politics.

Alisa Lombard, lawyer, Canada

Settler colonialism imposes a singular standardised system that diverse communities with very different systems must fit into. There's a link between the forced sterilisation of indigenous women and land reclamation; the violence has the same source – **both women and land give and sustain life**. In our languages and cultures, land doesn't belong to us, but rather we belong to it.

Western, **colonial law is prohibitory**; it tells you what you must not do – civil, criminal, and contract law. **Indigenous laws come from legal traditions that encourage a sincere dedication to a conduct** – to be kind, humble, brave, courageous, they are not about imposing indignity on others. So, there is a **conflict between these systems**, and it is challenging because the instruments aren't there to make the colonial system work with our traditions.

The **greatest threat to colonialism is to continue to do things your way**. What form this takes will depend on context, but we have to think in **novel and creative legal ways**. For example, when the opposing counsel says you can't do something during a trial or a proceeding, we ask why? Asserting yourself in the face of the oppressor and their representatives has an impact. Advocacy must be grounded in people's experience, and people must be put before treaty bodies.

Sometimes, customary law in southern Africa accords more than civil or even international law, and colonisers can't believe it because they think their systems are superior. **How do we articulate collective values into singular claims** when colonial systems worked to individualise harms and exclude the social aspect of our struggles?

We must build transnational solidarity based on survivors' experiences and not focus solely on what states' structures offer. **Advocacy has to be driven by experience**. Even with a progressive state, **implementation is a problem**. Sometimes, even when there is an acknowledgement of harm (as in the case of the residential schools in Canada), the **ideologies underpinning that system don't change**. The system may be fragile, but it's stubborn. We need to fight for alternative systems, which we often already have.

Conversation Two:

Coercive and punitive economic measures and their impact on sexual and reproductive rights

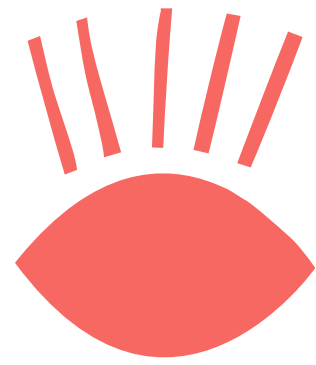
“Debt’s origins come from colonialism’s origins. Those who lend us money are those who colonised us.”

– Thomas Sankara, July 1987

From 2001 to 2021, the United States increased its use of sanctions by 933%. By its own admission, economic and financial sanctions are the US’s tool of “first resort” in pursuit of its foreign policy and national security goals. An example of a sanction that denies a country its own money is the US’s refusal to unfreeze the seven billion dollars of Afghanistan’s foreign assets held in the US. At the same time, 95% of all Afghans and 100% of all women-headed households don’t have enough food and people are boiling grass to eat and watching children starve.

The US government is one of the most egregious culprits in using economic coercion to maintain global dominance (and it has imposed two-thirds of all sanctions since the 1990s), but it is far from the only state to do so; the European Union and the United Kingdom also rely on their economic power for coercive leverage through sanctions and other means. Moreover, states are not the only entities that impose sanctions; besides the EU, other multinational bodies such as the UN and the OSCE also use coercive measures to punish states (most commonly in the Global South) and secure benefits for themselves. In addition to economic sanctions, which are often defended by concerns about human rights, terrorism, or nuclear threats, coercive economic practices include trade embargoes, predatory debt mechanisms, austerity measures, structural adjustment and privatisation, extractivism, unfair bilateral and multilateral trade agreements, OECD-imposed international taxation rules that enable tax abuse, and aid conditionality.

Even as coercive economic strategies continue to be widely condemned as a form of war by receiving nations, they often escape scrutiny because they have been naturalised into international law and trade protocols. Since the creation of the UN, efforts by Global South states to explicitly include economic pressure under the UN Charter’s prohibition of the use of force have been resisted by wealthy countries safeguarding their own interests. In keeping with capitalist logic, sanctions further existing inequality in targeted countries by making the poor poorer and the few elites richer, as evident in Iran.



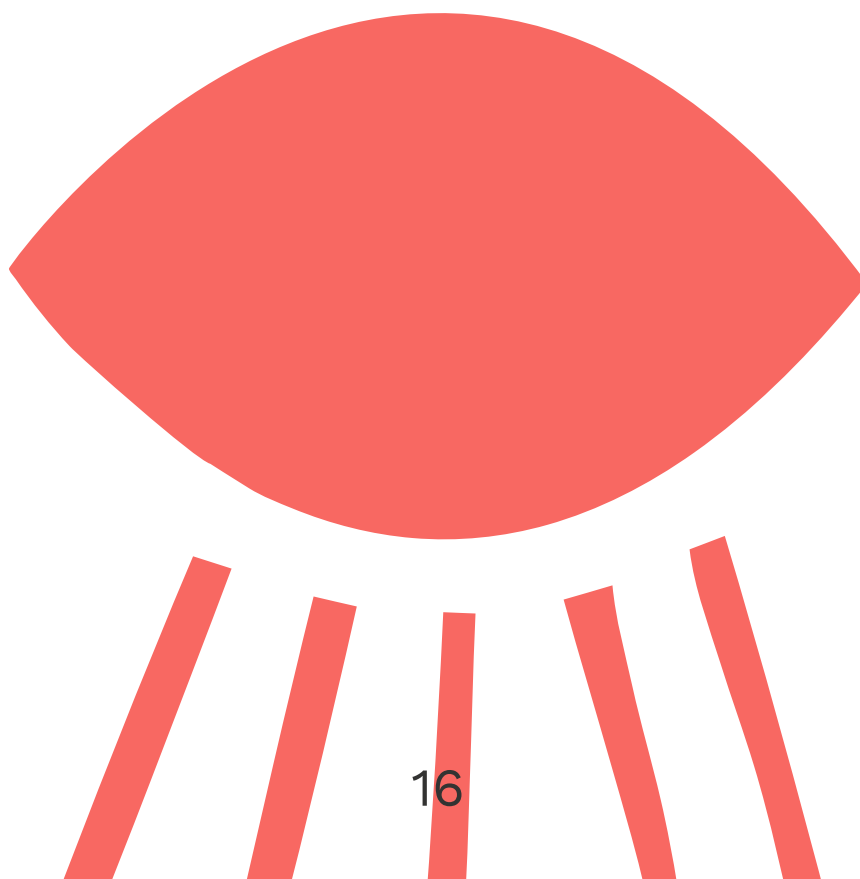
The use of coercive mechanisms to punish or discipline a state on its human rights record has particularly pernicious effects. Sexual orientation and gender identity, for example, are increasingly issues on which there's a liberal consensus in much of the Global North, and certain countries in the Global South routinely face censure and coercion when they fail to live up to their promises to LGBT populations. However, funding cuts almost always end up harming not only other vulnerable groups, such as women seeking SRHR services but also socially and economically marginalised members of the very groups ostensibly being defended; further, the identity politics-driven rationale of this kind of targeted coercion also undermines domestic efforts at cross-movement solidarity.

Debt has been another key mechanism for continuing the flow of wealth from previously colonised countries to the wealthy colonisers of the Global North. Countries previously ravaged through direct colonialism now not only spend significant amounts of their GDP servicing debts to the IMF and to private corporations but are also forced to privatise public goods and implement austerity measures that further deprive their people of basic entitlements such as education, clean water, and healthcare, such as in Argentina and Ecuador; 'bailouts' are a tool for generating poverty. Instead of paying reparations, countries whose development was funded through colonial exploitation continue to have their unsustainable lifestyles subsidised by the world's poorest peoples. In fact, poor countries' debt payments have hit the highest levels in 25 years; Sri Lanka's debt amounts to 75% of government revenue, and Pakistan's is nearly 50%. Moreover, nearly half the debt owed by poor countries is held by private lenders.

Whether through using unequal trade relations to maintain a cheap labour force as in the case of the factories in Mexico and Central America that produce beer and tshirts for US consumption or through sponsoring violent dictatorships and installing market-friendly governments in Latin American and sub-Saharan African countries whose leaders have wished to work for the benefit of the people, all the wars of the past 80 years, including economic ones and those initiated in the name of democracy and human rights, have been wars of profit, not least because weapons manufacturers need markets for their products.

The replacement of the postcolonial aspiration to social mobilisation and collective welfare in much of the Global South by individual human rights discourse and mechanisms has helped to obscure the harms done by economic warfare, as social and economic rights are still not recognised or enforceable as rights, as the plight of Venezuela's attempt to take the US to the ICC shows.

The lack of investment in public goods and services in countries in the grip of neoliberal policies and the increasing immiseration and consequent crackdown on protests and uprisings have a direct impact on all rights and entitlements, including sexual rights. Women and girls face the worst effects of poverty, direct and indirect gender based violence increases, unemployment and disenfranchisement fuel regressive social attitudes, and healthcare spending vanishes. Even when sexual and gender rights are not seen as a convenient proxy for undesirable and neocolonial foreign intervention, states may still be forced to sacrifice them because of limited resources. Predictably, gender and sexuality rights are then used by wealthy countries to further chastise and punish countries too poor to fund these rights.



Summary of the conversation

Dipika Nath, an independent researcher, moderated the discussion, and the speakers were **Maria Luisa Peralta**, Akáhatá, Argentina; **Niyanthini Kadirgamar**, Feminist Collective for Economic Justice, Sri Lanka and **Nana Abuelsoud**, EIPR, Egypt.

Framing

Dipika Nath, independent researcher

Whether in the form of **economic sanctions or through debt and bailouts**, which result in privatising public goods and mass poverty, coercive economic strategies continue to be widely used and just as widely condemned by receiving nations as **a form of war**. Despite their devastating impact on entire populations, **economic coercion often escapes scrutiny because it has been naturalised into international law and trade protocols**. Since the creation of the UN, efforts by Global South states to explicitly include economic pressure under the UN Charter's prohibition of the use of force have been resisted by wealthy countries. We want to explore how **political and economic ideologies and practices**, both historical and contemporary and at national, regional, and international levels, interact with and **influence gender and sexual rights**.

The **use of coercive mechanisms to punish or discipline a state** that is considered to be failing on its human rights record has particularly pernicious effects, as it pits groups within the targeted country against each other. The **identity politics**-driven rationale of this targeted coercion also **undermines domestic efforts at cross-movement solidarity**.

Instead of paying reparations, **countries whose development was funded through colonial exploitation continue to have their unsustainable lifestyles subsidised by the world's poorest people**. In fact, poor countries' debt payments have hit the highest levels in 25 years; Pakistan's debt amounts to nearly 50% of government revenue, Sri Lanka's is 75%, and Ghana's is projected to be 99% by the end of the year. We want to examine and challenge the **disingenuous separation of the economic sphere from the political and the social**, which allows the same countries that cause immiseration and starvation through their economic policies also to be the biggest self-appointed "champions" of human rights.

Inputs

Maria Luisa Peralta, Akáhatá, Argentina

The countries of **Central and Latin America have a decades-long history of the dispossession of the wealth of their people** through complicit relationships between economic elites, large transnational capital, and international financial institutions, especially the IMF and the World Bank. **The dictatorships that devastated practically all the countries in the region were not only military adventures but intended to establish market economies in** our countries through the destruction of national industry, alienation of natural resources, and installation of transnational companies that operate without regulations, and the dismantling of public health, education, transportation, and infrastructure services, and their subsequent privatisation – the bases of neoliberal regimes.

Argentina is in a disastrous economic situation, with 140% annual inflation, and an important reason for this is an illegal IMF loan, the largest in the history of not only the country but also of the Fund. Today, **40% of the population, including fully employed people, is poor**. In the **blockade of Venezuela**, which began in 2015, the United States and other countries had, until March this year, applied nearly **a thousand unilateral coercive measures**, which have had a **devastating impact** on the Venezuelan people.

The structural adjustment programmes and the conditions imposed by multilateral credit organisations throughout the region have meant not only the **dismantling and privatisation of public services** but also, in recent decades, an acceleration of the **plundering of natural assets**. The demands of the free market and the need to pay foreign debts have led governments to give **free rein to extractive industries that maximise their profits, produce severe environmental damage, and then take their benefits out of the country**, both deepening the cycle of impoverishment and contributing to the climate crisis.

When coercive economic measures are applied in the name of democracy, the burden is always more significant on people who are already marginalised.

These factors lead to a migration crisis; women travel to richer countries under precarious conditions and perform poorly paid labour. Poor women in poor countries subsidise care in rich countries. When coercive economic measures are applied in the name of democracy, **the burden is always more significant on people who are already marginalised** – working women, LGBTI+ people, and migrants, and these measures increase violence, blame and prejudice against them.

Cuts in public services don't affect everyone equally; instead, they work along pre-existing moral biases, including gender. During the debate on the abortion law in 2020, in the midst of the debt crisis, those who opposed abortion argued that its legalisation would mean a great cost for the health system and that the resources were required for more essential services – especially as **abortion was sought by badly behaved women**. The neoliberal government in **Peru forcibly sterilised Indigenous people** from 1990 to 2000, claiming that this was a solution to poverty. The **blockade in Venezuela affects women's access to contraceptive and reproductive services** and materials. However, the example of Cuba shows that the **decision to cut resources from health services is always political and ideological**, as it continued to fund abortion through decades of blockade.

Global South states can also manipulate their people when they claim that certain rights are promoted by the Global North to weaken Southern countries. Thus, we **need holistic policies that address particular contexts**. We should move away from **identity politics**; it's been important for LGBTI+ communities, but it also applies to race, citizenship, and class, and it **divides social movements and our collective strength**. We need to **displace the capitalist logic of scarcity in relation to rights** and not believe that there aren't enough resources and rights for all. There can be no hierarchy of rights; we want and can have everything. As feminist and queer movements have been articulating in Argentina, “the debt is owed to us,” and therefore, we should also have a say in these decisions.



*Niyanthini Kadirgamar, Feminist Collective for Economic Justice,
Sri Lanka*

Last year, **Sri Lanka went into one of the worst economic crises** in its post-independence history because it defaulted on its foreign debt, most of which was owed to financial institutions in the West. The immediate reasons for the crisis were the reduction in government revenues via **tax concessions granted to the rich and an ill-formulated ban on chemical fertilisers** that maimed the food system. At the same time, the country lost foreign exchange earnings during the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine led to a rise in commodity prices. The **global economic governance structure is such that Sri Lanka was forced to go to the IMF when it defaulted on foreign loans**, which imposed certain conditions before the country could be granted a green light for receiving external funding. Sri Lanka is among about **70 countries in the global south under debt distress**.

The crisis has been long in the making; Sri Lanka was **the first country in South Asia to liberalise** its economy and move into an export-oriented economy in the late 1970s. This allowed global capital to **capture agricultural land and dispossess farmers**, including women farmers; rural industry, protected by the government, was liberalised, causing more **unemployment in the rural sector**, again mostly among women. From the 1980s onwards, we see **migration from rural areas to urban centres to work in export oriented industries**, while others were going abroad as domestic workers. So, the economy is now structured around three central foreign exchange generating sectors – garment exports, migrant labour remittances, and tea plantations; **women form the majority of the labour force in these sectors** and work under harrowing conditions as very cheap labour.

Sri Lanka continues to plead for support from the IMF, which is portrayed as the saviour, and **consent and coercion coexist** in this situation. These **economic changes also have a social impact**. Women end up doing a lot more care work at home and women also shoulder the risks in a collapsing market. The resulting disruption in household hierarchies leads to an increase in violence. The **trickling down of risk is also differentiated by existing axes of marginalisation** in society along religious, ethnic, sexual orientation and gender identity lines.



The **ideological impact of these changes must be understood historically**. The liberalisation of the market was also accompanied by an ethnic conflict; the political economy took a backseat, and **ethno-nationalist politics dominated** for decades. There is **increasing consent for neoliberal policies** among a section of the polity and rights activists. Sri Lanka continues to have state-funded universal free education and healthcare. The real **challenge now is to safeguard these universal services** and push back against the ‘targeted’ approach recommended by international financial institutions, that determines who is deserving of what services. Another dilemma among some activists is whether to engage with an **unelected government that portrays itself as liberal in terms of gender and lgbt rights** even as it fully embraces the neoliberal agenda.

Economic policies are not gender and class neutral, though they are presented as such. We must demystify those economic policies and challenge the idea that it’s only the preserve of experts. We demand universal social security and a functional food system. We believe we can forge a different path only if we are rid of an IMF led global economic governance structure that forces countries in the global South into a cycle of debt.

Panic over **'overpopulation'** has been a recurring priority on every presidential agenda in Egypt since the 1950s. Historically, populations have either been seen as a **potential for economic development** or an **economic burden**, with China currently serving as a role model in population policies. The current presidency considers the population to be **a national threat and as the reason for the economic crisis**, which is being fueled by currency devaluation and weakened access to education and health services and exacerbated by Covid and the Ukraine war. There is a concerted **push from the government to limit the size of families even though fertility rates are decreasing**, especially among low income families. They end up with more than two children because they don't have access to services. One in five children in Egypt is either unwanted or unplanned, and thirty percent of women stop using **contraceptives in the first year of usage, usually because of their side effects. Still, the government is unwilling to address these structural issues.**

People who don't make enough money to support their families are considered to be undeserving of subsidies, and their **poverty is used to justify austerity measures.** In 2015, a cash transfer programme was accompanied by awareness programmes that sought to influence and increase contraceptive uptake. In 2018, a presidential programme called **"Two is enough"** offered incentives, including better employment opportunities and subsidised education, to people who did not have more than two children. The **government claimed it wasn't coercive**, but the conditional rewards are a form of punishment for those who have more than two children. Social protection regulations were also recently changed so that families cannot add a third child to their subsidy subscription – a measure that makes low-income families even poorer. The logic appears to be that **if you can afford to have a third child, you don't need subsidies** for education, health, or even public sector employment.

This year, the government offered a further incentive: women will receive a lump sum payment of about 30 dollars a year calculated from the age of 21 if they **make it to 45 years with two or fewer children.** Contraceptives are not always effective or safe and abortion is criminalised. Yet, in the context of an economic freefall, the promise of this payment seems attractive to women seeking a way out of dire poverty.

The eugenicist nature of these programmes becomes evident when we realise that they are all targeted at the same economically deprived groups. There's also a general **acceptance of neoliberal policies within the state apparatus and society**. In 2021, the parliament discussed whether to **deny the right to marry (and thus to legitimately have sex)** to a range of people deemed unfit to reproduce; if the discussion had proceeded, the list would have included people with disabilities, chronic depression, and people living with HIV and with diabetes.

Civil society and **feminists treat female genital mutilation and early childhood marriage as stand-alone issues** as if they are not a part of the economic pact. An exclusively sexual rights and liberation approach that doesn't address the fact that these practices offer a mode of survival to women and girls with very few choices is misguided and bound to fail. State efforts to **curb early marriage of girls are also motivated by a desire to control population growth** by delaying pregnancy and childbirth, not out of concern for the wellbeing of women and girls. **We cannot look at SRHR without looking at economic systems that treat people as capital; in effect, the poor have to choose between having sex (and marrying) and having enough food. This logic is also cheered on by many left groups.**

Instead of creating hierarchies of rights – social, economic, political, sexual – we need to **expand our commitment** to the causes we're fighting for to understand that **sexual rights are part of a whole**. Geopolitical tensions only make matters worse; for example, the UN Commission on Population and Development this year was **unable to reach an agreement on education because a few northern states were adamant about the inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education** when people in many countries don't have access to any education, leave alone a say in the curriculum. These are the **same states that reject recommendations around climate justice or foreign debt. Bodily autonomy** shouldn't just mean sexual and reproductive autonomy; it also means that **we have more control over our time** that we can relax and have a slow day without thinking we'll lose our livelihood just because we're not running against the clock.

Conversation Three:

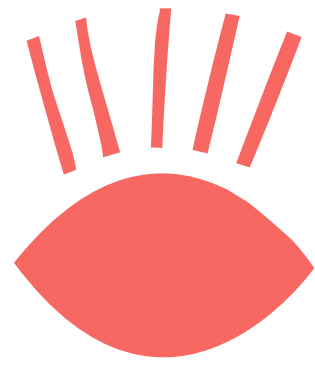
Coercion, cooption and collusion: Global governance under neoliberalism.

“No one should be fooled by the festive atmosphere of these celebrations. Outside, there is anguish and fear, insecurity about jobs and... a ‘life of quiet desperation’.”

– Rubens Ricupero, UNCTAD Secretary-General on GATT’s 50th anniversary, 1998

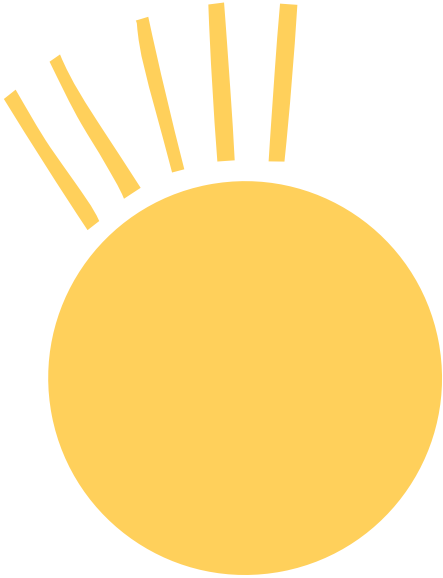
The international economic system established after WWII ostensibly to promote free trade and economic growth is helmed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, both headquartered in the US and presided over by a European and a (US) American, respectively. Just as political power was consolidated among the wealthy countries of the Global North, economic power was captured by these institutions and the wealthy countries whose interests they served, even as waves of decolonisation spread across Asia and Africa. The policies of the World Trade Organization (formerly GATT), unequal bilateral trade agreements, loans from the IMF and the WB (which require the opening of domestic economies to market capitalism), structural adjustment towards privatisation, aid conditionality, and the slashing of social protections and services were critical tools in promoting the new economic world order.

While always skewed in favour of opening markets in the Global South at any cost to the people of those countries, this order took a particularly virulent turn in the 1980s, the consequences of which have been ongoing socio-economic crises all over the Global South and among the poor of the Global North. As explored in our second conversation, economic debt, sanctions, and other coercive measures are key tools for continuing the colonial exploitation of the majority of the world’s population, nearly half of which lives in countries that spend more on interest payments than on health or education – even as the number of billionaires in the world continues to grow. Though global and international in name, the neoliberal economic system is hardly egalitarian, and its devastating policies and free-trade ‘agreements’ are often forced upon countries of the Global South, including through political, financial, and military intervention by the US and other colonial powers.



The unchecked power of corporations, the financialisation of markets, the emergence of private creditors, and the spread of wars for resources and profit have added further complexity to already and deliberately, opaque economic systems such that most people have, at best, a partial knowledge of the nature and workings of the international economic arrangements that profoundly affect, even determine, their ability to live with dignity. In a climate of deliberate obfuscation and duplicity and the relentless immiseration of entire regions of the world (albeit with enough local elites everywhere to prop up the indefensible economic system), rights become privileges to be enjoyed by those higher up the class ladder and extant hierarchies of gender, race/ethnicity, caste, religion, age, and other markers of social status become the “modality in which class is lived.”

Following the logic of intersectional oppression, the sexual and gender rights of women and queer people from all working class communities everywhere, and particularly from marginalised groups, only appear as aspirations in the workplans of NGOs. The extent of deprivation and the force of ideological domination is such that basic rights and entitlements, such as access to contraception and abortion, sexuality education, and consensual marriage, are out of reach for women living in conditions of economic precarity and privation, which are sold to them as being natural or fated. Yet, there are extremely well-resourced political and economic institutions whose mandate is to facilitate and promote the global economic world order that systematically steal from the poor to reward the rich.



What, then, are these systems? How are they held in check or kept accountable, and by whom? What is the relationship among global governance systems and structures, economic policies, aid, and ‘the international order’, international law? How have investor and corporate rights overtaken human rights through mechanisms like the investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) system? How is the intellectual property rights regime, which can wield power over life and death, connected to the economic system? Do the United Nations binding treaties lead to accountability within international economic systems? What would a rights-based economy look like? And how do economic factors affect human rights, and in particular, sexual rights worldwide? What value does a universal rights discourse have in the face of a west-supported Israel’s genocide against Palestinians?

This conversation was a step towards trying to demystify the economic systems and institutions that drive the neoliberal world order and to demonstrate links between economic injustice and a range of rights related to gender, sex, and sexuality. It is also an attempt to think of socio-political and economic alternatives to this order by examining movements and experiments in different parts of the world.

Summary of the conversation

The discussion was moderated by **Pooja Badarinath**, Senior Advocacy Advisor - Human Rights Council, Sexual Rights Initiative, and the speakers were **Crystal Simeoni**, The NAWI Afrifem Macroeconomics Collective, Nairobi, **Wesam Ahmed**, Al-Haq Centre for Applied International Law, Ramallah, **Gonzalo Berron**, Transnational Institute, Brazil and **Dipika Nath**, independent researcher, South Africa.



Framing

Pooja Badarinath, Sexual Rights Initiative, Geneva

The claim that human rights are indivisible and universal is under stress, and the collusion of Western **states in grave human rights violations** is currently in sharp focus. Yet, the impunity of corporate actors and their state supporters isn't new; we also saw it in hoarding vaccines and medicines.

The **unchecked power of corporations, the financialisation of markets, the emergence of private creditors, and the spread of wars for resources and profit** have added further complexity to deliberately opaque economic systems such that most people have, at best, a **partial knowledge of the workings of the international economic institutions** that profoundly affect, even determine, their ability to live with dignity. In a climate of **deliberate obfuscation and duplicity** and the relentless immiseration of entire regions of the world, **rights become privileges** to be enjoyed by those higher up in extant hierarchies of gender, race/ethnicity, caste and class, and religion.

The intersectional nature of our lives teaches us that our struggles and oppressions are connected even though the global governance system, whether economic or human rights, has found ways to keep our concerns and ideas separate. It wants us to break down our lives and bodies into individual pieces, never seeing the interconnectedness or the whole. The global **governance system wants us to compete rather than be in solidarity**, be pragmatic rather than radical, and think in individual rather than collective terms.

Inputs

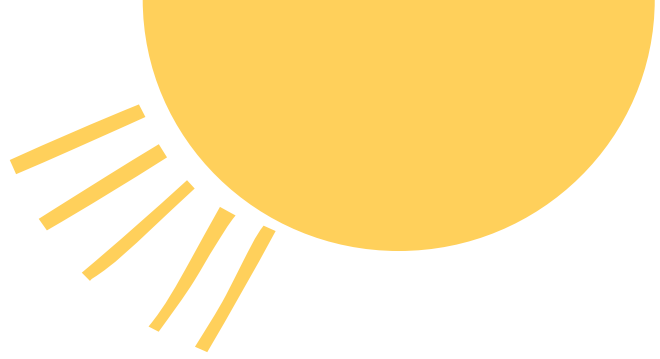
*Crystal Simeoni, The NAWI Afrifem Macroeconomics Collective,
Nairobi*

What's happening in Palestine and the DRC and Sudan – these are connected oppressions underpinned by questions of power. From a **pan-African feminist perspective working on economic justice regionally, we believe in centring decolonial manifestations of states** that are not violent towards their own populations and pushing back against the narrative that the African state is incapable of providing for her own.

From healthcare to education, to water, to housing, a social contract between the state and the citizen is now a contract between the state and private finance, often from the global North. Public-private partnerships follow the colonial extractive model in the majority world, **and the tools of extraction are the same whether you're in Latin America, Africa, or Asia.** This corporate capture of the state is systemic and backed by narratives that claim that states are inherently economically inefficient and that the policy issues involved are so complex that ordinary citizens cannot understand them, even though we know that **our people, our populations, our mothers, our families know and feel the economy in very intimate ways.** The disingenuous inference drawn from this is that private corporations operate in the public interest, and **what is good for corporations is considered self-evidently good for the state and citizens.**

The financialisation of everyday life has deepened the link between social reproduction and household debt, trapping people in generational cycles of poverty. Women's labour produces and sustains life, and households subsidise economies; this gendered oppression continues to reproduce a patriarchal, capitalist, and white supremacist global economy.

Having front-row seats to the genocide of Palestinians reminds us of the plight of people in Sudan and the DRC, who don't have access to technology in the same way; **what hope do we have for any form of justice in these places?** What does multilateralism mean when the **UN is presented as the most democratic space, but we know how veto powers are used** and nothing comes of non-binding treaties. Civil society, too, sometimes gets caught up in the technicalities of the work over the politics, and we forget whom we are supposed to work for and with.



Those who caused and continue to cause harm cannot be the ones who determine the remedy; **this analysis can only be done by us**. Practically, this means that we work in debt and tax justice movements to push against financialisation. **We also have to decolonise our own work by understanding and historicising neoliberalism and capitalism to undo colonialism**. Colonial capitalism undermines indigenous ways of knowing, and we resist it by oscillating between the technical and the colloquial, and **we resist in collectives**. Across Africa, women have saving circles, which are **real-life manifestations of social solidarity economics**.

We have to nurture our ability to dream, unshackle ourselves from our current reality, and be audacious enough to dream of new models, systems, and governance. Resistance also means refocusing the struggle. We cannot keep fighting simply to survive; our struggles are meaningless and indeed not revolutionary if they don't offer a serious possibility to thrive as human beings.

Most interventions around **women's economic empowerment in Africa are micro-level projects** – financial inclusion, microcredit, and other individually targeted interventions that can only go so far. Even with these individualised interventions, women still need access to education for their children, public transport options, and healthcare. For this, we need an African feminist analysis of these issues at the macro and systemic levels **and to develop alternatives through focusing on interlocking oppressions** and the politics of everyday life. We pay attention to the prevalence of violence in the lives of African women and work to **redefine macroeconomic policies** from a pan-African lens rooted in indigenous history and knowledge, to **democratise and decentralise economic decision making**, and to **centre equality, wellbeing, and sustainability** as the objective of economic activity. We work hard to **decolonise knowledge production by centring cultural work** that shapes and transforms macro-level economic narratives. We centre the role of social reproduction in all our work and seek to **link social justice movements, including women's rights organisations, to organisations working on macro-level economic issues** and towards a cross-pollination.



*Wesam Ahmed, Al-Haq Centre for Applied International Law,
Ramallah*

Imperialism is a macro-level issue, and we tend to get lost in the details – right now, in the details of the developing genocide in Gaza. It's essential to understand what brought us to this point in Palestine. **The connection between neoliberal economics and settler colonialism is necessary to put the process of colonisation in the broader context of geopolitical and economic interests** that are fuelling the ongoing colonisation of Palestine.

A 1925 document on colonising Palestine asks, “**What medium should be employed to colonise a country** on a large scale: should it be done by **philanthropy or treated as a business** proposition along strict business lines?” There's a clear connection between imperial interests, financial enterprises, and their impact on the indigenous population.

When the British Mandate took over Palestine, it was keen to merge its imperial interests with the Zionist project and **despite the development of international law, The Israel Corporation, a modern-day crown charter company, was formed in 1968**, immediately after the occupation of Palestinian territory. The uniqueness of this company lies in how it **intersected with hegemonic neoliberal economics and institutional human rights**, which are now perhaps seen as part of neoliberalism in how it compartmentalises rights, which presents challenges when we try to use the UN system.

The complexity of the ongoing colonisation of Palestine requires us to understand the **architecture of exploitation; the Israeli economic system of colonisation** (from weapons and surveillance technology to chemicals, agriculture, insurance, cosmetics, and energy) **rests under the roof created by global power relations, the international political economy, and international law, and is supported by external pillars of support** (military aid, charity, trade, and investment) **and internal pillars of exploitation** of Palestinian resources and people.

The present situation in Gaza is a continuation of past resource exploitation; a hundred years ago, it was oil, and today, it's natural gas. New trade and canal routes are being proposed, both of which go through the north of Gaza. The projects of **neoliberalism and settler colonialism are based on the concept of economic absorptive capacity;** the potential to absorb settlers requires economic viability, and corporations play a major role in ensuring this capacity.

Whether and how to engage with the UN system is a key question. The institutionalisation of human rights under the umbrella of the UN in the context of decolonisation sent the message that those seeking self-determination need to come off the streets and into offices, stop reading manifestos, and become lawyers. Doing that didn't stop us from being labelled terrorists.

The indigenous population always pays the price for these economic endeavours rooted in colonialism, and today, we're seeing its modern face. The disappointment now is that it's **happening in front of our eyes, and it's unmasked the underlying imperial dimensions of international law**, which is either complicit with imperialism or, when it isn't, is ignored in favour of geopolitical economic interests. We see it exposed in the Palestinian context. However, this presents an opportunity to re-evaluate how far we have come and how much we allow each other to suffer for imperial interests. This **watershed moment could force us to shift away from an imperial mindset to embrace solidarity** in many areas, including climate change and individual rights.

Whether and how to engage with the UN system is a key question. The **institutionalisation of human rights** under the umbrella of the UN in the context of decolonisation sent the message that those seeking self-determination need to come off the streets and into offices, stop reading manifestos, **and become lawyers**. Doing that didn't stop us from being labelled terrorists. We are at a juncture in history when new ideas can emerge, even though neoliberalism tries to prevent us from imagining a different reality.

We must **try to force change at the UN from within, but not exclusively**. Long-term solidarity with Palestinians requires continuing to undertake advocacy engagement in policy education, within the framework of international law. **If we want to give the spirit of the law meaning, we have to push for its application** and not give in to frustration because otherwise, the process will continue without resistance. **The UN offers space to engage with many stakeholders and states**, which is an essential tool. We must recognise our place in the system and the power of the individual; if everyone is pushing towards the same goal, the system will eventually change.

Gonzalo Berron, Transnational Institute, Brazil

This year is the **fiftieth anniversary of the coup against Salvador Allende** and the fifty-first speech he gave at the UN, denouncing **corporations' power in society and politics**. He was forecasting what would happen in Chile and opening a debate on the role of multinational corporations in the modern capitalist world. **Economic power has always been structured into social relationships**, but what was important was the relationship between corporate power, the global economy, and politics.


Following Allende's speech, an agreement was made **to set up a multinational centre within UNCTAD to monitor the activities of transnational corporations** and their role in public policy. This worked temporarily, **but it didn't generate policies to regulate corporate power**. Then came neoliberalism, and the horizon of transnational corporations expanded through the Washington Consensus, whose agenda was to amplify markets and offer benefits to international investment. This materialised in the creation of the WTO, and several internal, bilateral, and multilateral agreements led to the first type of corporate capture. The **WTO transformed from an organisation regulating international trade standards to one pushing free trade** and establishing norms and rules to guarantee international investments.

This generated an **architecture of impunity** and gave rights to investors and companies against human rights and social rights, and eventually became the macro-structure that was **consolidated in the 1990s and developed in the 2000s**. There was global social resistance against neoliberal globalisation, and, in some places, it managed to slow down the process.

In the 1980s and 1990s, **different initiatives to regulate transnational corporations failed**. There was some 'soft' law that wasn't legally binding and was a form of greenwashing. Companies committed to some rights in the late 1990s, including environmental rights, but **the same companies committing terrible crimes were considered champions of international standards**. In the 2010s, the UN guiding principles on human rights for companies provided another set of rules that were not legally binding. Then we reached the **legally binding treaty that is being discussed now and which transnational corporations have tried to block**.

Corporate capture can happen through corporations lobbying the state, or they may **influence political agendas through donations made directly or through their proxies, and philanthropic organisations**. This is evident in many UN spaces; for example, the private sector has been made responsible for implementing the SDGs. This means that **billions of dollars of state funds will be given to companies in the name of the SDGs**. This generates space for new business opportunities. The multistakeholder nature of Covax allowed some private corporations to function at the same level as states.

We are in the multilateral system because of a concrete problem – the violation of human rights by transnational corporations in Latin America, which was systematic and global. The **real problem, we realised, was the lack of international human rights law**. The social movements and affected communities went to the Human Rights Council to expose the violations (and the complicity of their states) and the lack of an international regulatory framework. Doing this, we realised a structural problem – the corporate capture of the multilateral system. **There is a clear connection between what is decided in multilateral spaces and the reality on the ground**. The global governance system includes multistakeholderism, which delocates policy and decision making from the multilateral system, with states leading the process, to the private sector. The effects of **multistakeholderism, one form of corporate capture, are most starkly felt in developing countries** because they leave very little room for states to make autonomous decisions.



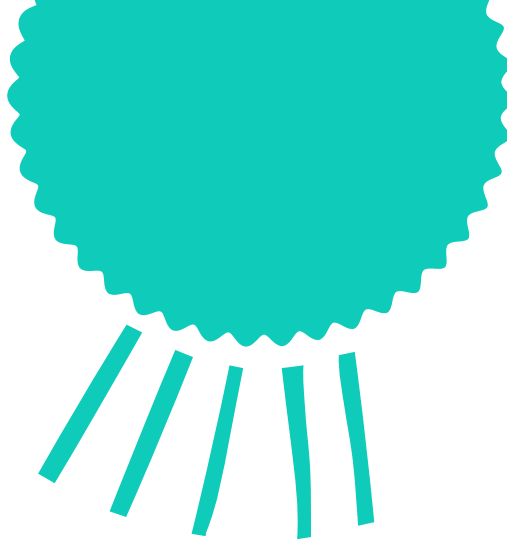
The effects of multistakeholderism, one form of corporate capture, are most starkly felt in developing countries because they leave very little room for states to make autonomous decisions.

Dipika Nath, independent researcher, South Africa

In material terms, women and their labour continue to be exploited in specifically gendered ways in neoliberal capitalism, and gender and sexual rights continue to be denied and even decried because of naturalised gender and sexual roles.

In structural terms, the post-WWII macroeconomic system has primarily privileged countries in the global North and created small pockets of **elites in the global South**, and this has had a direct impact on marginalised bodies of all stripes. **Women bear the brunt of structural adjustment policies in the global South as the focus shifts from structural inequality to individual rights.** The shock therapy forced upon southern countries by international monetary institutions and the financialisation of the economy led to **unparalleled inequality, and resistance movements have also struggled.**

Regarding organising, the simultaneous **ascendance of neoliberal ideologies and human rights** has impacted how we think about rights and entitlements. However, **civil and political rights divorced from economic rights only lead to fractures nationally and internationally**, as evident in the case of sexual and reproductive healthcare. Global governance systems with real teeth, such as trade treaties and coercive economic systems, and others, such as the human rights system, seem to be deliberately constructed as a feel-good exercise. The Western predilection for fragmentation shows itself in the form of neatly divided movements and discourses, and LGBT rights are one telling instance of this division. **Funding and donor priorities follow this logic of division** and identity politics.



In discourse and ideology, the global economic system is protected from and made inaccessible to everyone but appropriately trained **experts worldwide, who become the agents of neoliberal systems in the global South**. Neoliberal ideology finds its way into our habits of thought and conditions us to consider all relationships as transactional and competitive and to view all resources as scarce when it is precisely the plenitude in the global South that kicked off five hundred years of colonialism.

The ascendance of identity politics means that **status or representation rights are considered the end of oppression**, but this vision of progress is maintained through considerable ideological and economic coercion. The obscurity of the global economic system attempts to shield from view the duplicitous nature of Western states who champion human rights even as their economic policies render the realisation of these rights impossible. **Extraction and exploitation continue through trade and the unchecked power of corporations.**

However, the complicity and active participation of local elites in the global South in the project of capitalist, patriarchal, and racist exploitation alerts us to the **impossibility of neat geographical divisions between coloniser and colonised**. Further, even colonialism is no longer racially coherent, as leaders in the global South prove themselves to be capable of colonialist logics just as well as traditional colonisers are.

The **codependent relationship between capitalism and patriarchy sometimes results in tensions**; for example, for all its privileging of economic rationality, capitalism isn't ever comfortable with sex work because it posits serious questions about the relationship between gender and the patriarchal economy.

Implications for advocacy

Some initial ideas

- 1. Intersectionality and Cross-Fertilisation:** Recognise the intersectionality of sexual rights and economic justice within the context of neoliberal capitalism, which seeks to coopt collective struggles into an individual rights framework that only privileges social and economic elites in any society. Advocate for a cross-fertilisation of these fields to develop more comprehensive critiques that address the complicity between sexual rights and capitalism in different regional and socioeconomic contexts.
- 2. Beyond Individualism:** Acknowledge the embodied and social nature of sexual rights and strive to move beyond individualist rights discourses. Emphasise the collective aspects of sexual rights to address broader societal issues and promote a more inclusive understanding of rights that does not limit 'sexual rights' to minority groups. Learn from and adopt non-Western / non-individualist understandings and traditions of collective mobilisation.
- 3. Cross-Movement and Transnational Solidarity:** Recognise the importance of cross-movement and transnational solidarity in challenging capitalist as well as sexual logics. However, understand that solidarity alone may not be sufficient. Advocate for coalitional work that goes beyond single-issue movements to create a more unified front against capitalist structures.
- 4. Reclaiming Human Rights Language:** Work towards salvaging the language of human rights from its co-optation by conservative actors and capitalist interests. Explore the potential alignment of human rights with socialist principles to fulfil their promise and contribute to a more equitable society.
- 5. Challenging Extractivism and Neoliberal Logics:** Challenge ongoing colonialist and capitalist extractivist discourses and practices, which extend beyond natural resources to include indigenous knowledge systems. Explore fissures within fundamentalist capitalism to allow for alternative 'structures of feeling' and ways of thinking to emerge.





6. **Questioning Good Intentions:** Question presumptions of good intentions on the part of historical colonisers and contemporary extractors. Develop a critical attitude towards the actions of powerful entities and actors in colonised places, acknowledging historical injustices and ongoing power imbalances.
7. **Resisting NGOisation:** Resist the downside of NGOisation by insisting on collective imagining and action. Promote alternative ways of conceptualising anti-capitalist structures and futures, acknowledging the existence of such alternatives in marginalised communities despite their denigration.
8. **Clear-Eyed Engagement:** Engage with existing advocacy spaces, such as the UN, in a clear-eyed manner, understanding the inherent logic of power within these spaces while retaining hope and optimism for alternative conceptualisations of anti-capitalist and people-oriented structures and futures.
9. **Collective Investment:** Strive for collective investment in advocacy efforts, emphasising the importance of community involvement and participation, and co-accountability. Foster a sense of shared responsibility and action to counter the negative effects of competitiveness and individualism, and promote a more collaborative approach.
10. **Optimism and Hope:** Retain a sense of hope and optimism for alternative ways of thinking and organising by continuously learning about, investing in, and empowering anti-capitalist alternatives in different political, social, and regional contexts.



