The last two decades have witnessed attempts to reform the economic and political characteristics of African states along the lines of the neoliberal development paradigm. In the economic arena, most states have instituted development policies aimed at significantly reducing the role of the state. On the political front, an attempt has been made to introduce good governance practices of which an important aspect has been the demise of one-party authoritarian states and the establishment of multiparty political structures. In neoliberal terms, these reforms are intended to rejuvenate Africa’s stunted economic and political development and thus facilitate the continent’s transition to modern market-based capitalist societies.

This paper examines neoliberal restructuring with specific reference to reforms geared to promote a market-based capital accumulation process in contemporary Africa. The paper contends that, contrary to the neoliberal theory that informs contemporary reconfiguration of the role of the state in the economic arena in Africa and elsewhere, state structures and markets are not gender neutral. The analysis demonstrates how the patriarchal ideology that has marked the evolution of a state-led capital accumulation process has contributed to the marginalization of the majority of African women. It also highlights how the promotion of market-led accumulation strategies by the transnational lending community and the governing institutions of this community, leading among them the World Bank, is deepening this process in the contemporary era. The paper has three sections. The first section discusses the dominant approaches to the central concerns of this paper and highlights the analytical power of a critical feminist political economy perspective. Section two demonstrates the gendered foundations of African states through an examination of core aspects of the
state-led accumulation process in the colonial and pre-neoliberal restructuring periods. The last section analyzes the key features of neoliberal market-based reforms and shows their gendered nature.

**Gender and the State vs. Market Debate: Dominant Theoretical Perspectives**

The ascendancy of the global neoliberal political, cultural, and economic project has generated a significant debate on the role of the state and market in capital accumulation processes. Given space limitations, it is impossible to discuss all of the interesting strands of all theoretical approaches characterizing that debate; consequently, this discussion is limited to the dominant perspectives of neoliberalism, neo-Weberian, political economy, and feminist political economy.

The economic dimension of the neoliberal development paradigm has its roots in the evolution of classical economic thought. In its current rebirth, this approach deems the states themselves, in Africa and elsewhere, to be the main barriers to economic growth. In the neoliberal view, the role of African states in postcolonial economic development has been so extensive that it has led to the inefficient allocation of resources and hampered the emergence of entrepreneurs. Thus, for scholars working within this paradigm, the reduction of the role of the state and the promotion of the market logic with all its attendant features — for example, the monopoly of private capital and privatization of public goods — is the key to overcoming Africa’s economic stagnation.

The neo-Weberian perspective, commonly known as neopatrimonialism, has its intellectual roots in the writings of Max Weber on social, economic, and political change. According to this perspective, neopatrimonial practices have their roots in traditional African political and economic systems in which leaders (patrons) extended social and economic benefits to their local people (clients) and in return gained — in addition to extensive power — obedience, admiration, and loyalty. Most works situated in this perspective emphasize the neopatrimonial foundation of African states, which has created avenues for irrational economic practices, the concentration of power in personalized state structures, and other practices leading to the emergence of states that are not developmental in character. For studies situated within
this perspective, the establishment and deepening of market initiatives will facilitate the emergence of state structures committed to eliminating economic waste through rent-seeking activities, and a technocratic bureaucratic cadre committed to promoting a rational economic and political development path.

The contributions of the political economy perspective to the debate have attempted to broaden the analytical terrain, given what scholars working within this approach deem to be major limitations of the preceding approaches. Central to the political economy approach is an examination of the logic and rise of a global capitalist system characterized by power asymmetry and the marginalization of countries at the periphery of this system, especially those in Africa. Along these lines, Samir Amin argues that rather than merely highlighting the “failure” or “success” of economic processes — which tends to be characteristic of mainstream studies — scholars need to explain why owners of capital and institutions governing the expansion of global capitalism have at times facilitated this process and at other times constrained it.

Scholars using this approach also contend that the role of the state and the market in capital accumulation processes cannot be understood fully if the global and national dialectic is neglected in analytical frameworks, which tends to be the case in most studies situated within the neoliberal and neo-Weberian perspective. Using such an approach, for instance, dismantles the hegemonic explanation of contemporary African economic crises, which says that they emerge solely from within national borders and have nothing to do with the local and global political, economic, and intellectual shifts. Critical political economists also call for a broader conceptualization of states and markets to incorporate the historical, political, ideological, and economic foundations that shape their role in the capital accumulation process.

While the above-noted dominant theoretical approaches offer insights to the central concerns of this paper, their profound silence on the gendered nature of state- and market-led capital accumulation strategies limits their analytical power in the study of neoliberal economic restructuring in Africa. Even the political economy approach, which addresses major gaps in the mainstream literature, has, as Joanne Cook and Jennifer Roberts argue,
made gender power relations “invisible … with women, and things feminine, defined only in relation to the masculine norm.” This paper situates itself within the critical feminist political economy tradition, which, like the political economy approach, links national and global developments in explanations of contemporary neoliberal globalization. Specifically, it builds its analysis on decades of critical feminist political economy scholarship that incorporate gender as an analytical category along with cultural, historical, ideological, and structural factors in the examination of institutional, political, and economic processes, and highlights the link between social reproduction and economic production. Using this approach as an entry point, this paper not only demonstrates the gendered nature of pre-existing states, but also unmasks the gender bias in policies and concepts that are central to the neoliberal project in Africa, such as efficiency, market initiatives, and state failure. For example, the so-called market incentives in the agrarian sector, as will be demonstrated later, are gendered and thus there is nothing neutral about them. So, contrary to the dominant perspectives, markets in any sector have to be understood as socially constructed institutions whose evolution leads to a reconfiguration of societal structures, including gender power relations. In essence, neoliberal promotion of a market-led capital accumulation pattern has, in Africa as elsewhere, affected women and men differently. Yet, as Janine Brodie has argued, while neoliberalism “recommends a fundamental reordering of the mode of regulation and a new definition of the public good, [it] is silent about the gendered underpinnings of this shift.”

Rise of Gendered States  Critical feminist scholars have pointed out the gendered character of states through analysis of, for instance, political participation and democratization. An examination of the pattern of capital accumulation processes offers another site for exploring this phenomenon. This section of the paper briefly demonstrates the gendered foundations of African states by examining how the patriarchal ideological foundation of African states, along with the evolution of the core elements of these states’ accumulation strategies prior to neoliberal restructuring, contributed to the marginalization of the majority of African women.
The gendered foundations of contemporary African states have their origins in European imperial projects of the nineteenth century. Colonial economic structures in the main involved the introduction of capitalist agricultural production in countries such as Zimbabwe, Senegal, Kenya, Ivory Coast, Malawi, and many others, and the extraction of the continent's mineral wealth, which saw various European interests competing for pieces of what King Leopold of Belgium referred to as “this magnificent African cake.”

The evolution of the above-cited features of colonial states’ economic strategies was marked by gender bias and laid the foundation for the economic marginalization of most African women. In the agrarian sector, this began with the land commodification process when the colonial state deemed African men to be heads of households and the rightful owners of land; consequently, men became title deed holders once Africans were allowed to own land. While not all African men benefitted from colonial land alienation policies — this process, like other historical developments, was mediated by cultural practices such as age, lineage, and the embryonic colonial class structure — they were nevertheless able to accumulate wealth because, as owners of land, they could access capital that could facilitate their entry to other sectors of the economy, or use their wealth for leisure activities. Such a strong base for creating wealth was not available to African women, except indirectly for those who were related to men with access to the colonial political machinery.

The land alienation policy was not the only element of the colonial economic structures that demonstrated the gendered foundations of African states. The introduction of cash crops affected women and men differently. Colonial officials, with the help of men from African traditional ruling strata, constructed men as farmers and the social actors who, given their masculine “essence,” would be open to the modernization of the agricultural sector. Thus, men were given the role of controlling and dispensing new technology and seeds, and also access to training in modern agricultural methods. In the eyes of colonial authorities, African women were backward, childish, and irrational and could not contribute to the emerging modern agricultural sector. Colonial states’ racist attitude towards African women,
coupled with their patriarchal ideological framework whose hallmark was deeply held Victorian ideas about the role of women in political, social, and economic processes, contributed greatly to the marginalization of African women in the agrarian sector. Yet, it was African women who worked in both the cash crop and the food production subsectors as men left their villages to work in, for instance, the European plantations in Malawi, the White Highlands in Kenya, the mines of Southern African, or the emerging urban centres.

The gendered pattern of accumulation strategies also marked the emergence of the mining sector, which was the constitutive feature of colonial accumulation strategies in mineral-rich colonies, such as contemporary South Africa, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In these countries, African men were forced to leave their homes to meet the economic demands generated by the colonial political economy, such as the introduction of hut and head taxes and the deepening of monetized economic activities. The establishment of mining centres was a gendered process from the outset because colonial recruiting policies prohibited African men from bringing their families to the mining towns. From the colonial states’ standpoint and mining interests, it was important to extract as much labour as possible from African men; mandatory, state-sanctioned separation from their families, in addition to forced labour practices, facilitated this process. Further, the policy of restricting the movement of African women to the mining towns also served the rural economic interests of the colonial state, African chiefs, and men. In the development of the colonial agrarian sector, it ensured steady and cheap labour from African women in the rural areas. For the chiefs, this colonial policy ensured that they maintained their control and access to wealth from cultural practices such as bride wealth; for African men, it protected their land rights.

The development of the mining sector had a major impact on gender and power relations in African societies. As in the newly established cash crop sector, African men could use their wages to buy properties and land, to pursue leisure activities, or to enter emerging sectors of the colonial economy as they become open to Africans. African women did not have such options and thus ended up creating alternative economic avenues for themselves in
precarious and unstable informal economic activities, such as beer-brewing and the commercial sex trade. Further, the rise of the mining sector led to the establishment of a labour migration system, a development that had a profound impact on the evolution of African families because it disrupted family structures in a manner very similar to that in political economies underpinned by slavery, such as in the United States and the Caribbean. In addition, it increased the workload of African women by changing the precolonial patriarchal, yet complementary, division of labour between women and men.\(^{19}\) This process, in addition to other colonial wage labour policies and industrialization strategies, also laid the foundation for the rise of a gendered employment pattern that limited women’s access to wage employment. As Marjorie Mbilinyi demonstrates, in colonial Tanzania, a country that was once a major source of migrant labour, women and men accounted for three percent and 19 percent of wage earners respectively in 1948. Further, women whose labour under colonial rule was categorized as “child labour” were paid significantly less, with wages 30 percent lower than those of men.\(^{20}\)

While the dismantling of European imperialism opened up political and economic spaces for Africans, the gendered character of colonial states’ accumulation strategies did not fundamentally change in the postcolonial era. While African women contributed greatly to the anticolonial struggle, their participation in the public arena, both politically and economically, was put on the back burner as ruling elites redefined gender roles in efforts to protect male interests. For instance, in contrast to their public roles in anticolonial struggles, women were suddenly constructed as apolitical beings and relegated to roles suited to their so-called innate nature: decent and God-fearing wives and mothers, tireless farm labourers, and the mothers of the newly independent nations. These are the same women who had, in the case of Zambia for example, contributed greatly in the nationalist struggle by “felling … trees to block roads making them impassable to the enemy … staging half-naked demonstrations, [and] taking part in civil disobedience” and mobilization campaigns and political education.\(^{21}\)

In the economic arena, the social construction of women as inferior apolitical beings, and the gender bias embedded in various state-led accumulation
strategies, resulted in the deepening of the historical marginalization of African women. For example, during this era of state-led capitalism, a number of African states instituted various capital indigenization programs in an effort to create and expand local capitalist classes. This process mainly benefitted men drawn from the dominant classes and state-appointed ethnic notables at the expense of the majority of women and men from the lower social classes. In the case of postcolonial Zambia, for example, women, who are the mainstay of agricultural production, were denied access to modern agricultural methods such as the “Train and Visit System” agricultural training program sponsored by the World Bank.

Thus Africa’s postcolonial state-led economic “boom” of the 1960s and early 1970s was a gendered process. This does not mean that African women were hapless “victims” and that they were not agents of their own history, or that they did not engage the state or seek ways to improve their economic positions. But this does stress the dialectical relationship between political agency and power structures because no social or political struggles, including those of African women, occur in a power vacuum. For instance, women who were members of women’s organizations closely linked to the ruling parties had better access to the state apparatus, while women from subordinate classes were generally marginalized or had their strategic demands contained during the pre-market-based reforms era. Even when African women carved economic spaces for their survival, the gendered foundations of African states led to containment of the expansion and strengthening of these spaces because they were considered a challenge to the local patriarchal state ideological framework that constructed women’s and men’s roles differently. In Ghana, for example, the military dictatorship of Jerry Rawlings promoted a discourse that blamed the country’s historically important women market traders for the country’s economic crisis, and in its high noon in the late 1970s, members of its security apparatus “bulldozed Makola No.1 Market and reduced it to a pile of rubble,” an act viewed by the soldiers involved as a great male disciplinary measure that would “teach Ghanaian women to stop being wicked.”

By the late 1970s, when the state-led capital accumulation strategy began to unravel due to internal and external political, intellectual, and economic
developments, a clearly gendered accumulation pattern constituted the foundations of these states. Yet, as these states embarked on a neoliberal accumulation strategy, promoters of this development paradigm and practice neglected to take into consideration the gendered nature of these states. It is important to note that the omission of gender issues in the era of state-led capitalism occurred not only at the level of state accumulation patterns, but also in dominant theories of development, such as modernization theory and development practices of global development institutions like the World Bank, whose development projects were presented as gender neutral.26

**Gender and the Promotion of Market-led Accumulation** The promotion of market-led capital accumulation strategy in the global South has its origins in the onset of the global economic crisis of the late 1970s. At the global level, the post-1945 boom was facing deep fractures for a myriad of reasons, the central ones being the two oil crises of the 1970s, structural changes in economic production, and the breakdown of the Bretton Woods economic framework, especially its financial arrangement that had afforded nation-states the ability to control capital movement.27 In Africa, this crisis manifested itself in the inability of governments to service their debt, declining private and public investment, declining exports, and balance-of-payment problems.28

As the crisis deepened, African countries responded by embarking on economic reforms based on neoliberal economic thought, which, due to global shifts in intellectual, economic, and political arenas, had slowly become the global hegemonic economic paradigm. On the intellectual terrain, the 1970s also saw shifts in intellectual economic thought and practice. The latter was marked by the withering away of the Keynesian economic framework that had governed post-World War II economic ideas, the rise of neoliberal ideas drawn from thinkers such as F. Hayek and M. Friedman, and, in the sub-field of development, the arrival of what John Toye has termed the “counter-revolution,” embodied in the work of Deepak Lal and Ian Little, among others.29 Fundamentally, this neoliberal revolution called for the curtailment of the role of the state in economic affairs, privatization of the public sector, promotion of the entrepreneurial spirit,
liberalization of financial markets, and promotion of international free trade. Powerful as these ideas were, however, their ascendency to hegemonic status occurred because of the earlier-mentioned unravelling of the post-World War II capitalist boom and the rise of conservative governments in the key industrialized countries — Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain, Ronald Reagan in the United States, and Helmut Kohl in Germany — whose political projects embraced the core ideas of neoliberalism.

In the context of Africa’s development, this neoliberal “counterrevolution” in thought explained the continent’s economic crisis and stagnation as being a result of the state’s extensive role in economic affairs, especially through the expansion of publicly owned enterprises in the postcolonial period. Other contributing factors were said to be trade protection measures, such as high tariffs and licensing procedures, and overvalued currencies. In addition, agricultural policies, especially the practice of paying small-scale producers limited returns for their products, and the decline of agricultural exports in the 1970s, were seen as contributing to economic stagnation and crisis. The expenditure patterns followed by postcolonial governments of providing subsidies in agriculture and in social sectors such as education and health, and the expansion of the civil service were also considered to be contributing factors.

The preceding brief outline of the central tenets of neoliberal economic policies indicates a gender-blind approach to economic processes that characterize neoliberal globalization in Africa and elsewhere. The silence on the gendered nature of economic processes becomes even more evident, as this section of the paper demonstrates, when one examines the core reforms geared to the emergence of a capital accumulation strategy subsumed to the logic of market-led capital accumulation processes: agrarian reforms, privatization, and social sector spending, which is what we turn to in the next section.

**Agricultural Reforms** Given the structural reality of the dominance of agrarian production in most African economies, agricultural reform has been a central focus in the promotion of market-based patterns of capital accumulation. As a detailed analysis of all these targeted agricultural reforms is beyond the scope of this paper, the discussion will be limited to an exami-
nation of the much-touted reforms in the small-scale agricultural subsector. One of the core reforms in that subsector has addressed a well-studied phenomenon: the asymmetric nature of agrarian produce earnings that marked colonial and postcolonial state agricultural practices. For these states, farmers in the large-scale subsector earned the equivalent of international prices in local currency for their agrarian produce, while state-owned agricultural enterprises paid small-scale farmers low prices. Thus, with the onset of economic crisis and a shift in development discourse, reforms in state agricultural practices have become a focal point of neoliberal reforms. In the small-scale subsector, reforms have included, but are not limited to, the introduction of market incentives to facilitate increased agricultural output (because a core argument of neoliberalism is that 1970s' declines in agricultural exports contributed greatly to the economic crisis) and to increase earnings for farmers in this sector. With respect to the latter, small-scale producers are no longer mandated to sell their agricultural surplus to state-owned enterprises and can sell to private traders who, it is assumed, given their commitment to efficiency and profit making, will pay them higher prices.

Securing individual land ownership for small-scale farmers is another reform advocated under neoliberal structuring of the agrarian sector. According to the World Bank, this development is important at the household and national levels because it would lead to increases in agricultural production, thus enabling farmers and African countries to accrue more earnings from exports. According to the World Bank's land reform agenda, small-scale farmers enjoying individual land ownership are more productive than those in large-scale farming operations because the former do not incur high labour costs; they rely solely on what the World Bank calls "non-contractor labour" provided by members of households. Another argument put forward by the World Bank is that, armed with titled deeds, small-scale farmers can borrow capital from the emerging rural credit markets and transform land from a "dead asset" to an economic resource that they can use "to invest, accumulate wealth, and transfer ... between generations" and, in the process, gain what the World Bank calls "major equity benefits."
Given the historical marginalization of a large segment of small-scale farmers, the call for reforms is a welcome development. However, neoliberal advocates fail to consider the cultural, political, and economic context that frame these reforms. Specifically, years after Boserup's seminal intervention, the new development paradigm has neglected to analyze the gendered nature of agricultural production in both small- and large-scale sectors. In this era of neoliberal restructuring, small-scale producers are perceived as self-maximizing rational individuals who, unmediated by gender power relations, will take advantage of market incentives in their onward march to economic progress. Fundamental issues, such as the fact that gender power dynamics would influence women's access to, and the nature of, their interaction with private traders, are also unproblematized in this era of promoting a dehistorized market-led accumulation strategy.

Other factors, such as the male bias that characterizes most land-tenure systems in Africa, matrilineal and patrilineal specificity notwithstanding, and how this continues to limit women's agrarian production and economic well-being, are left untouched. As discussed earlier, since the early days of the land commodification process, it is African men who have benefitted from this development because of the patriarchal ideological foundations of local states and societies. Consequently, the current phase of that process, rather than facilitating the ability of women to achieve the so-called “major equity benefits” only deepens their marginalization at various levels. For instance, as has been argued here, it is women who have historically constituted the backbone of agricultural production in Africa. Consequently, it is these social actors who, as Manji has argued, will end up servicing and paying the debts their husbands and other male relatives accumulate as they enter rural credit markets using their land as collateral.

Further, the assumed increase in agricultural productivity in the small-scale sector due to marked-based land tenure is premised, as stated earlier, on the gender-blind notion of non-contractible labour. But as this paper and other studies have argued, gender power relations shape agricultural labour processes, and given that it is women who predominantly provide unwaged labour in the agricultural sector, it is they who will contribute to whatever increases occur in this sector. Of course, the presentation of terms such as non-contractible labour in a gender-blind manner emerges from the failure
of mainstream scholars to problematize terms such as “the family,” “household,” and “labour markets.” These concepts do not exist, evolve, or translate in cultural, political, and economic vacuums. The notion of household, for example, which is a core concept in hegemonic economic discourses such as the current agrarian reforms being promoted in Africa, is a gendered term. A central assumption of policies such as the World Bank’s contemporary land reform in Africa is that members of the household work collaboratively for the welfare of the unit, guided by “a benevolent dictator” and altruism rather than by the rational “self-ish behaviour expected in the marketplace.” Such a conceptualization of households is very limited because it fails to problematize the power politics that govern family relationships.

Using an approach that foregrounds tensions and hierarchies in household processes, Amartya Sen argues that households should not be articulated as power-neutral places, but rather as sites embedded in power dynamics characterized by “cooperative conflict”: a social practice that involves a “bargaining process” whose outcome is shaped by an individual’s “gender, lifecycle, and class” positioning in a household. Thus, a person’s role in the economic sphere in any household or community is influenced by gender ideologies and other power dynamics. Such an approach to labour and household processes would shed more light on our understanding of the gendered nature of the much cherished ideology and practice of “hard work” among the Gikuyu community in Kenya. While everyone in this community is supposed to embrace the ideology of hard work and a disciplined work ethic epitomized by the culturally held myth that “work has never killed anyone,” this ideology is disseminated differently to men and women and affects them differently. Throughout their formative years, young girls of all social classes hear the mantra “Women, especially mothers, never get sick,” and marrying a woman who is lazy or from a lazy lineage is a disgrace. These cultural gender power dynamics have historically resulted in heavy workloads for Gikuyu women, especially women involved in agrarian production, a process that will only deepen with the promotion of notions such as the World Bank’s doctrine of non-contractible labour. Further, rural class dynamics in the Gikuyu community will also shape that process because women from the ‘aboi’ marginalized class will have little room to manoeuvre compared to their counterparts whose husbands own land.
In addition, the question of how restructuring in other sectors, such as social spending (to be discussed later), would affect women’s involvement in agriculture has been left out of the neoliberal agrarian reform agenda, which fails to take account of the interconnectedness of all economic production. Last but not least, the overall decline of agricultural earnings in Africa and other regions on the periphery of the global system, due to the asymmetrical nature of the global trading structure and the resulting impact on small-scale production, is depoliticized and framed within the ahistorical and technical discourse of comparative advantage and free market incentives.

**Privatization** The privatization of government-owned public enterprises is another policy reform aimed at reducing the role of the state and facilitating the transition to market-led capitalism. The postcolonial pattern of accumulation in most of Africa saw the expansion of colonial public enterprises as a core component of state-led capitalism. This trend was not relegated to the continent alone, but rather was a development model embraced by other countries in the so-called Third World that was informed by theories of late-modernizing societies, the rise of welfare states in the West after the 1930s economic crisis, and the contradictions generated by colonialism.

For newly independent African states, public enterprises encompassed all the important sectors of their economic structures. In the financial sector, state-owned banks and insurance firms became the norm in diverse political/ideological landscapes, such as President Julius Nyerere’s Tanzania and President Jono Kenyatta’s Kenya. Agrarian production and marketing paras-tatalis, such as the Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation in Malawi (ADMARC), governed the extraction of agricultural surplus, albeit differently, for the estate and small-scale agricultural subsectors. The Industrial and Commercial Development Corporation and Malawi Development Corporation were responsible for the evolution of industrial and commercial development in Kenya and Malawi respectively.

Due to historical and international political and economic conditions, the varied forms of state-led capitalism led to steady economic growth in the first decade or so of the first wave of transition to independence on the
African continent. For example, in countries such as Côte d’Ivoire, which had a strong local capitalist class and an influx of French capital, and in former colonial settler economies such as Kenya with Kenyatta’s pro-Western alliance stance, economic growth was significant compared with that in other African countries. Even countries such as Malawi, considered a “colonial slum,” also experienced rapid economic growth between 1964 and 1972 due to favourable international markets for agricultural commodities and Kamuzu Banda regime’s stand against communists.46

As Africa’s postcolonial states entered a period of fiscal crisis, their reliance on public enterprises as engines of state-led capitalism came under heavy criticism, especially by scholars working within the new development paradigm of neoliberalism and the transnational lending community, including leading institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. According to supporters of neoliberal economic reforms, public enterprises were largely responsible for the continent’s limited development and economic crisis because they were inefficient, created rent-seeking opportunities, and stifled the entrepreneurial spirit. It is in this respect, then, that neoliberal discourse presented parastatal reform along market lines as a central element in Africa’s recovery from its economic quagmire. These reforms included the sale of publicly owned enterprises and a commitment to the creation of “an incentive system conducive to efficient performance.”47

Liquidating public enterprises would supposedly not only reduce the role of the state in economic affairs, but also lead to the emergence of an independent capitalist class committed to an ethos of efficiency, comparative advantage, competition, and a free market system.

Over the last 20 years, African states have established bodies to facilitate public enterprise reforms. While absent in the mainstream literature on privatization, gender power relations within specific African countries have shaped the evolution of the privatization process. The gender-blind and ahistorical nature of the neoliberal theory that informs privatization discourse has resulted in the neglect of the gendering that marks privatization. This discourse assumes that women and men have equal access to capital and thus will participate equally in the buying of state-owned enterprises. To be sure, social class, ethnicity, religion, and other social categories mediate
the ability of both women and men to participate in the accumulation process. However, in the case of African societies, historical developments have continually marginalized large numbers of women. Thus, one can make a general statement about this reality without falling into the homogenizing tendency that Chandra Mohanty’s seminal work addresses. In terms of privatization programs, primary data from Malawi indicates that of the number of public enterprises sold, none was bought by a woman or a group of women. Essentially, these figures show the reproduction of class power: it is men drawn from the dominant class — the upper echelons of the ruling parties, the nascent bourgeoisie, and the bureaucracy — who have benefitted from Malawi’s privatization process. Foreign owners of capital have also been major actors in privatization processes in various African countries. In Senegal, for instance, Yassine Fall demonstrates how the state, with the support of the World Bank, has deepened foreign capital involvement in key economic sectors through the privatization program. Even after challenges from groups in civil society against the privatization of the state-owned energy provider SENELEC, the Senegalese state went ahead and sold the company to Hydraulique Quebec. Further, in the telecommunication sector, the state has guaranteed SONATEL, the new owner, a seven-year monopoly in this arena, and the French RATP and SDE firms have benefitted from purchasing former public enterprises in the transportation and water provision sectors respectively.

**Social Sector Spending** The reduction of social sector expenditure is another central tenet of the neoliberal capital accumulation framework. Like the privatization of publicly owned enterprises, these reforms are based on the premise that the nature of postcolonial state expenditure in sectors such as health and education was inefficient and led to the wasting of resources. Central to the rolling-back of the state’s involvement in the economic arena, African states have had to accept severe reductions in health spending. Historically, state expenditure on health has been very low in most of Africa, with the household, specifically women, carrying the burden of health care for their family members, and the promotion of market ideology has greatly deepened this process.
A core tenet of health sector reforms has been the introduction of user fees, a process that has had serious effects on women and children. In the Zaria region of Nigeria, the introduction of user fees led to an increase of 56 percent in maternal deaths and a 46 percent drop in hospital deliveries. The assumption underpinning the introduction of user fees is that women and other members of marginalized social forces can meet their health costs, but as Nanda argues, this position assumes women have similar social and economic resources. A study on market-based health reforms in Uganda demonstrated that it is men who control access to earnings from the cash crop sector, although it is women who not only work in this sector but also take care of sick relatives. According to another study in Zaire about the introduction of user fees, “a rapid increase in the price of health care sharply decreased the demand for curative services, prenatal visits and clinics for children under 5 years of age.” Consequently, as Elson has argued, what neoliberal economists saw as increased efficiency from reduced hospital costs has amounted to “simply a transfer of the costs from the hospital to the home … which in practice means women.” This has serious implications for women’s well-being because, as women stated in a study of health sector reforms in Zambia, “they could not afford to be ill because of the time it would take away from their work”; in Ghana, “doctors reported that women were presenting much more complex, chronic and terminal ailments because they delayed seeking medical treatment.”

The health crisis facing most African women with the evolution of neoliberal reforms is compounded by austerity reforms in other sectors. In Mozambique, increases in food prices with the removal of government subsidies has led to a “widespread deterioration in the nutritional status of children and pregnant and lactating mothers in both rural and urban areas … Mothers are unable to buy enough food of the right type to feed the whole family, and in many cases priority in feeding is given to adult males.”

While the World Bank has modified its health sector reform policies and now calls on African states to provide a clinical package that includes “perinatal and delivery care, family services, management of the sick child, [and] tuberculosis,” which is linked to HIV, this modification is still very limited and does not address the health needs of women beyond their role
as mothers. Moreover, this shift should be put in the overall context of the Bank’s approach to women’s health in Africa, which mainly aims to ensure that local states enact measures to control population growth. Further, the majority of women live in the rural areas with limited opportunities for alternative economic activities in the era of state restructuring; thus an already poor health infrastructure, coupled with neoliberal health reforms, reduce their ability to take care of their own and their family’s health.

Overall, the reduction in social sector spending has affected women and men differently. For example, removing government subsidies for education has led to increased educational costs — a development that has contributed to the reproduction of the historical gender bias in education opportunities for the majority of African girls, in Chad, 29.4% of girls and 49.6% of boys attend school. Two decades of reforms have led to a public outcry, inspiring some governments attempting to gain popular support, especially in the days leading up to general elections, to promise to introduce free education — albeit not with a gender analysis. Beyond reforms in education and health, the so-called rationalization of the civil service through policies such as public sector retrenchment has led to the loss of jobs in sectors that have generally been employment domains for the majority of women, such as nursing, teaching, clerical work, and low-end managerial positions. In the African context, this has led to an increased workload for women, a social trend that a Tanzanian woman characterized as “the big slavery,” work with “no boundaries” that is “endless.” To be sure, variables neglected by neoliberal advocates, such as class and cultural practices (remember the earlier-mentioned work ethic of the Gikuyu community in Kenya), have also compounded this trend.

**Responses by African Women** Contemporary African women, like their counterparts in earlier historical periods, have of course responded to these new realities not only by challenging the neoliberal development model, evidenced by their strong involvement in the popular social movements of the early 1990s and the growing antiglobalization forum, but also by seeking whatever economic avenues they can find to sustain their social and economic needs. For example, these women have become the dominant workers in
export-free zones as global firms establish offshore production sites in various regions of the global South. While offering women wage employment, the offshore production zones search for cheap, flexible, and abundant labour; hence, contrary to their claims of contributing to women’s empowerment, they have ensured that women are trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty due to the nature of work in these zones. The core characteristics of this kind of work are low pay, insecure wage contracts, and exploitative working conditions marked by extensive surveillance and long working hours. The social and economic well-being of women working in offshore production sites in the global South are further undermined, as Saskia Sassen has argued, because the traditional route for struggling for better wages and working conditions — through labour unions’ bargaining with capital — is not open to them due to the antilabour practices, new production regimes, the reorganization of labour with the decline of the traditional economic sectors, and immigration patterns in the current phase of globalization.68

As employment opportunities for women engaged in some form of wage-labour are scarce, African women are in constant search of additional means of meeting the economic demands and needs of their families. This social phenomenon, commonly referred to as “hassling,” is especially common for women in Africa’s declining middle classes, and even in segments of the upper-middle classes.69 Nevertheless, the “hassling” trend is not limited to women in these classes; women in rural areas have also had to deal with the impact of state restructuring. In the rural areas, women have become involved in the precarious world of agricultural piece work for households that can still afford to hire workers. Piecework agricultural wages are traditionally very low and gendered: “Women receive only one-third of male wages and, unlike men, they typically choose to be paid in kind.”70

Women are also increasingly engaged in activities that have historically been linked to men, such as drug trafficking and armed robbery.71 Furthermore, there has been an increase in, and social remapping of, street work during this period of neoliberal restructuring. In Nigeria, a study by Sade Taiwo of commercial sex work in various cities indicates that the women engaged in this work are increasingly drawn from the educated strata, from high school to university graduates, who, while aware of the psychological
violence and other problems generated by this line of work, see it as the only alternative in the current historical moment. Suffice to conclude by stressing that, in the midst of economic crisis and austere economic policies, women in Africa have to find ways to meet the economic needs of their immediate families and, in the context of the HIV/AIDS crisis, care for sick relatives. In Africa, as elsewhere, women have become, to use Janine Brodie’s phrase, the “shock-absorbers” of neoliberal restructuring. This “caring sector” is not viewed as contributing to a country’s economic activities in official economic analysis. Yet, according to the United Nations Development Program, “if women's work was monetized it would add up to US$11 trillion a year, a huge contribution to the world economy.”

Gender, States, and Markets: Concluding Notes The neoliberal development theory and practice has been the hegemonic development paradigm for more than two decades now. This paper has demonstrated the gendered nature of state- and market-led capital accumulation strategies. Thus, while the neoliberal paradigm presents capital accumulation processes and core policies and concepts (such as privatization, civil service retrenchment, and self-regulating markets) as gender neutral, a critical feminist political economy approach of this phenomenon (such as the one utilized here) demonstrates the gendered foundation of neoliberal discourses and practices. In addition to unmasking the gender bias in the neoliberal economic project, this analysis has attempted to highlight how the historical, cultural conditions and the gendered foundations of African states place structural limits on women’s political agency.

Notes

1. Neoliberal restructuring is not limited to just the economic structure of African states, but extends also to their political organization, which is viewed as lacking good governance structures (a situation that has manifested itself in high levels of corruption and abuse of human rights). Political reforms under neoliberal restructuring have concentrated on promoting good governance structures and establishing multiparty democratic states. Goran Hyden, “Governance and the Study of Politics,” in Goran Hyden and Michael Bratton, (eds.), Governance and Politics in Africa (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1992), p. 23.
3. For extensive discussion on this, see Jean-François Bayart, The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly (London: Longman, 1993) and Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1997).


12. During the 1884 Berlin Conference, which resulted in various European powers laying claim to various parts of Africa, King Leopold stated that he wanted to have a piece of this magnificent African cake and was given what became known as the Congo Free state, contemporary Democratic Republic of Congo, as his personal fiefdom, along with all its natural resources including rubber, which became its dominant export at the turn of the twentieth century. Quoted in the film, *This Magnificent African Cake* (Basil Davidson, *African Film Series* Vol. 3).


17. It is important to note that the gendered labour migrant system and forced labour practices were not limited to the mineral rich colonies, but also to agrarian-based colonies, such as Ivory Coast, Senegal, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, and many others.


22. For Malawi’s capital indigenization process, see Eunice Njeri Sahle, “The Making of a Malawian Ruling Class and the Struggle for Democratic Change,” (forthcoming), and David Himbara, respectively.


26. For an in-depth discussion of the gendered nature of dominant theories of development, see Catherine V. Scott, Gender and Development Rethinking Modernization and Dependency Theory (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Riener Publishers, 1995).


32. Other benefits enjoyed by large-scale farmers were easy access to loans, production of high-earning export crops, agricultural extension services, etc.


38. Ibid.

42. References to Gikuyu metaphors drawn from some aspects of author’s cultural memory. For an elaboration of the manifestations of Gikuyu and Luo communities and the colonial and postcolonial Kenyan state’s patriarchal ideology, see Wambui Waiyaki Orieno’s fascinating biography Mau Mau’s Daughter: A Life History (London and Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).
43. Gikuyu term for the landless.
51. Ibid.
52. For figures on declining health spending, see Meredith Turshen, “Impact of Economic Reforms on Women’s Health and Health Care in Sub-Saharan Africa,” in Nahid Aslanbeigui, Steven Pressman and Gale Summerfield, (eds.), Women in the Age of Economic Transformation (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 79.
55. Ibid., p. 131.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
61. Meredith Turshen "Impact of Economic Reforms ..." p. 89.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., pp. 77, 91.
64. For a powerful visual presentation of this phenomenon, see the documentary film “These Girls are Missing,” which chronicles the obstacles and struggles that young girls from a variety of regions in Africa face in attempts to gain basic education.
66. Malawi and Kenya are the best examples: Bakili Muluzi and Mwai Kibaki made the introduction of free education a central promise during their respective presidential campaigns.
69. I am indebted to friends in Malawi — Freda Chimimba and Felicitas B. Msamati — and in Kenya, Irene M’kwenda.
72. Ibid., p. 88.