

Salam Said & Adriana Qubaiova (Eds.)

Rethinking Neoliberalism in WANA

Feminist Economic Perspectives



Bibliographical information of the German National Library

The German National Library catalogues this publication in the German National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic information can be found on the internet at: <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

ISBN 978-3-8012-3300-6

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Verlag J. H. W. Dietz Nachf. GmbH
Dreizehnmorgenweg 24, 53175 Bonn
Tel. +49 (0)228/18 48 770 / info@dietz-verlag.de

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Cover design: Rohtext, Bonn
Illustrations (cover and inside): Sara Khayat, sarakhayat.com
Typesetting (and tables):
Kempken DTP-Service | Satztechnik · Druckvorstufe · Mediengestaltung, Marburg
Printing and processing: Bookpress, Olsztyn

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Foreword

Discussing feminist economics in a context dominated by neoliberal ideologies is not an easy task. In the WANA region, in which neoliberalism continues to shape economic and social policies despite multiple crises, economic, environmental and political, the challenges are even greater. Feminist economics remains largely unfamiliar in the region, both as an approach capable of addressing regional challenges and as a rigorous analytical tool. It circulates primarily within selected progressive circles in academia and civil society organisations engaged with international movements critical of neoliberalism.

The situation is further complicated by the region's ongoing brain drain, driven by wars, economic crises, environmental disasters and authoritarian governance, alongside the rise of conservative Islamic movements, and in some cases, Salafist and Islamist currents. Feminist economics is often mistakenly associated with "White feminism", which is perceived as colonial and contrary to religious values and local traditions. Worsening poverty and the deterioration of public education – including schools, universities and cultural centres – have also limited people's access to reliable information and academic literature, leaving many dependent on mainstream media and unverified social media sources. In this context, it is both necessary and urgent to explain and promote feminist economics as an analytical framework capable of addressing the structural roots of inequality, while also clarifying its distinction from the reductive and demonised understanding of feminism prevalent in the region.

Against this backdrop, this volume seeks to fill the gap in feminist economics scholarship in the WANA region, presenting the discipline beyond the primitive and misunderstood notions of "feminism" and "economics". It is a collective effort by researchers from across WANA, representing a diversity of disciplines and fields of study.

The editors wish to express their sincere gratitude to all authors, reviewers and participants. Special thanks are extended to Farah

Dhaibes, the FES team, Mohamed Gammara, Samantha Elia, Slaheddin Mnoubi, Katja Sommer and Meltem Yasar for their continuous support and enthusiasm throughout the project.

Finally, the editors would like to thank Perla Rizk for her excellent translation and James Patterson for his outstanding editing work, and Sara Khayat for her creative illustrations.

The editors

Dr Salam Said & Dr Adriana Qubaiova

Introduction

Salam Said & Adriana Qubaiova

How is feminist economics relevant to the study of the West Asia and North Africa (WANA)¹ region?

This question frames the present volume. In a context shaped by neoliberal restructuring, protracted conflicts, and deepening gendered, class-based, racialised and sectarian inequalities, it has become increasingly evident that neoclassical economic frameworks and mainstream policy approaches are ill-equipped to address the region's most pressing challenges.

The WANA region confronts a set of interlocking economic crises, including persistently high levels of poverty and unemployment, accelerating inflation and currency depreciation, prolonged economic stagnation, and mounting public debt burdens, among others. Moreover, persistent inequality and armed conflict continue to characterise the region, further compounding these economic crises. The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings – whose participants called for more equitable, democratic, and sustainable models of economic development – ultimately failed to yield durable democratic institutions or meaningfully to reduce social and economic inequalities. These outcomes underscore the urgency of rethinking how we conceptualise and analyse the economic challenges facing the WANA region today. This volume advances such rethinking by drawing on the analytical insights and methodological tools of feminist economics, offering

1 We use the term “West Asia” instead of “Middle East” or “Near East” in a bid to counter the colonial approach of naming this area in relation to Europe. West Asia is a more inclusive, decolonial and indeed geographically accurate term. See, for example, the following discussion: Azari, Kamal (2025, March 14). “Rethinking the ‘Middle East’: A Case for ‘West Asia’ – Analysis,” *Eurasia Review*. Available at: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/14032025-rethinking-the-middle-east-a-case-for-west-asia-analysis/>.

alternative frameworks for understanding and addressing the structural roots of inequality, crisis, and conflict in the region.

The volume highlights three interrelated factors that shape the WANA region's economic realities, demonstrating their implications in terms of a need for alternative economic approaches and pointing towards a more equitable and just future. Specifically, it advocates for feminist economics as both a conceptual framework and an analytical tool for tackling the region's key socioeconomic challenges. These challenges include, **first**, the reintroduction and intensification of neoliberal economic policies, which had already exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities prior to the 2011 uprisings and were themselves among the structural causes of the protests. **Second**, one might mention the geopolitical interests of external and "imperial"² actors such as the European Union, the United States and Russia, coupled with their direct armed involvement and indirect political and economic interventions, which have played a decisive role in destabilising the region and intensifying conflict dynamics. Additionally, they have led to longstanding destruction of the environment³ and theft of resources, and have exacerbated inequality. A **third** challenge involves the persistence of gender, racial, sectarian, ethnic, and class inequalities, which remain largely ignored in mainstream economic policies and approaches. These are often underpinned by conserva-

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- 2 Imperialism as a form of economic dominance over other countries through capitalism and structural dependency. In this regard, see Said, Edward W. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf; and Amin, Samir (1976). *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
 - 3 The environmental destruction in the GAZA war alone has been immense. At least 40 per cent of trees and farmland have been destroyed; see Ahmed, Kamil, Damien Gayle, and Aseel Mousa (2024, March 29). "Ecocide in Gaza: Does the Scale of Environmental Destruction Amount to a War Crime?," *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/mar/29/gaza-israel-palestinian-war-ecocide-environmental-destruction-pollution-rome-statute-war-crimes-aoe>. The long-term climate cost of Israel's military actions in Gaza and exchanges with Yemen, Iran and Lebanon is equivalent to charging 2.6 billion smartphones or operating 84 gas power plants for a year. See Lakhani, Nina (2025, May 2025). "Carbon Footprint of Israel's War on Gaza Exceeds That of Many Entire Countries," *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/30/carbon-footprint-of-israels-war-on-gaza-exceeds-that-of-many-entire-countries>.

tive and patriarchal structures, which have experienced a resurgence in recent decades, in line with a global shift to the right and the ensuing dismantling of the welfare state, accompanied by spending cuts on social provision and services.

Before addressing feminist economics as a more appropriate **analytical framework and economic approach** for understanding economic dynamics in WANA, the following sections situate the identified factors within a broader critique of neoliberalism, as articulated by economists and social scientists. This framing places the WANA region's socioeconomic challenges within a global context, one that has promised equality but has, in practice, delivered deepening inequalities. On this basis, the volume adopts an intersectional perspective that integrates economic analysis with broader social, environmental and political questions, including conflict, sustainability, gender equity, migration and agricultural systems.

The volume brings together ten papers covering seven countries in the region, using feminist economics as an analytical tool to examine economic imbalances and social disparities. By situating economic processes within their wider social and political contexts, the volume offers a comprehensive overview of the region's key socioeconomic challenges, their underlying drivers and potential pathways towards more just and inclusive outcomes.

Neoliberalism: A Dominant Global Doctrine With Devastating Outcomes

Neoliberalism, as a framework of political-economic practices, has shaped policymaking worldwide since the 1970s⁴ and has become a **dominant doctrine**, promoted systematically by influential states, policymakers, leading academic institutions, and international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF)

4 Harvey, David (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.

and the World Bank. At both global and national levels, it prioritises the interests of capital, facilitating the concentration of wealth among a small elite while undermining public institutions and social welfare systems. As both a policy agenda and an ideological lens, neoliberalism structures economic governance through free-market reforms that preserve private assets and wealth, while largely disregarding social and economic inequalities and environmental concerns.⁵

In the WANA region, neoliberalism was introduced primarily through international financial institutions, particularly via IMF loan conditionalities. Following the postcolonial period – when newly independent states favoured developmental and socialist economic models – global economic shifts and recurrent crises prompted a reorientation toward export-led growth. States turned increasingly to IMF borrowing to tackle budget deficits, and the ensuing loans were conditioned on the implementation of so-called “Structural Adjustment Programs” (SAPs).⁶ These programmes enforced neoliberal reforms, ranging from cuts in public spending on employment, subsidies and social services to privatisation and trade liberalisation (deregulation). The linkages between these policies and rising inequality, as well as development failure, have been examined by numerous researchers, representing a variety of disciplinary perspectives, from within and beyond the region.⁷

5 Ibid.

6 See, for instance, Saeed, Ahlam Nassar Omar (2024). “Role and Impact of World Bank Structural Adjustment Programs in Developing Countries: Analyzing the Effectiveness of SAPs in the Middle East: The Case of Jordan,” *Humán Innovációs Szemle* XV(1): 162–185. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.61177/HISZ.2024.15.1.10> and Said, Salam (2011). *Globalisierung und Regionalisierung im arabischen Raum: Zur Entstehung der “Großen Arabischen Freihandelszone” (GAFTA) und die Auswirkung auf Textil-, Bekleidungs- und Olivenölindustrie in Syria*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag. Radwan, Tarek, ed. (2020). *The Impact and Influence of International Financial Institutions on the Middle East and North Africa*. Tunis: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Regional Project. Available at: <https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/ident/fes/16107>.

7 See Mossallem, Mohammed (2015, November). *The IMF in the Arab World: Lessons Unlearned*. London: Bretton Woods Project. Available at: <https://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/final-MENA-report.pdf>; but see also MENAFem <https://>

One of the most problematic aspects of neoliberalism is its close association with **inequality**. By prioritising capitalist accumulation while disadvantaging poorer nations and individuals, it not only produces but also institutionalises inequality, widening social and economic disparities within and between states. Key mechanisms include the marketisation of public services – particularly health care and education – cuts to social spending and subsidies for vulnerable groups, and tax systems that favour the wealthy. While billionaires relentlessly expand their fortunes, a modest 5 per cent tax on multi-millionaires and billionaires could raise \$1.7 trillion annually, enough to lift 2 billion people out of poverty. As a result of existing tax policies, marginalisation and poverty are structurally reproduced across generations.⁸ As sociologist Michael Schwalbe notes, “Inequality is created and reproduced by institutionalising imbalanced flows of socially valued resources”.⁹ Similarly, Thomas Piketty argues that the persistent concentration of wealth under contemporary capitalism reinforces structural inequalities by prioritising capital accumulation over redistribution.¹⁰

The WANA region is one of the most unequal in the world, with high income and wealth disparities, for example, between rich and poor, rural and urban populations, women and men, migrants and nationals, younger and older generations, and peripheral and central urban areas. Studies show that income is highly concentrated among top earners, and inequality continues to widen as a result of policies that favour capital over labour and underinvest in social protections. Evidence from inequality research in WANA, including Oxfam reports

menafemovement.org/, Oxfam <https://www.oxfam.org/en/tags/middle-east-and-north-africa>, FES MENA <https://mena.fes.de/topics/economic-policies-for-social-justice.html>.

8 Oxfam International (2024, January 17). “Richest 1 % bagged nearly twice as much wealth as the rest of the world put together over the past two years,” *Oxfam International*. Available at: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/richest-1-bag-nearly-twice-much-wealth-rest-world-put-together-over-past-two-years>.

9 Schwalbe, Michael (2008). *Rigging The Game: How Inequality is Reproduced in Everyday Life*. Oxford University Press, p. 26.

10 Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the twenty-first century* (A. Goldhammer, trans.). Harvard University Press.