Neoliberalism and Feminist Discourse: Between Assimilation and Resistance in the Arab Context

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Since the early 1990s, neoliberalism in the Arab world has not merely functioned as an economic policy imposing privatization and shrinking the role of the state. It has also manifested as a cultural-symbolic hegemonic structure that redefined concepts such as "empowerment," "success," and "freedom" under market conditions rather than through the lens of justice. At the heart of this transformation, feminist discourse has been re-produced to align with the logic of "individual merit" instead of interrogating the social structures that perpetuate discrimination.

This paper examines this transformation by deconstructing its structural dialectic: How did neoliberalism ally with patriarchy and authoritarianism to recast Arab feminism as a tool for symbolic inclusion rather than a force for structural deconstruction? How was empowerment transformed into a marketable performance, and success into a representational appearance? Drawing on the tools of feminist political economy, the paper re-analyzes this trajectory as a hidden pattern of self-discipline rather than overt exclusion.

The second half of the paper is devoted to tracing narratives of feminist resistance that emerge despite hegemonic constraints, generating diverse forms of action, organization, and discourse. These differ in their tools and locations, yet converge in rejecting the containment of the self within market logic. From this vantage point, the paper becomes a call to reinvent the path—toward an intersectional, liberatory feminism that restores empowerment to its political roots and reclaims women's rights and social justice as a transformative project, not a promotional slogan.

By the early 1990s, most Arab countries entered a phase of economic restructuring, coinciding with the decline of the developmental state model and the rise of free-market policies imposed by international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. This transformation materialized through privatization, subsidy cuts, market liberalization, and reduced social spending. Simultaneously, poverty deepened, union protections eroded, and the gap between social classes widened. All of this unfolded under the banner of "reform" and "sustainable development," yet at its core, it marked a reversal of the principles of social justice—including gender justice.

In this climate, a new discourse on "women's empowerment" emerged, largely driven by international directives or official domestic sponsorship. Public policies emphasized integrating women into the labor market, facilitating access to microfinance, and promoting "women entrepreneurs" and "businesswomen," often spotlighting successful female figures in the media and private sector. However, this selective discourse overlooked women's class and geographic contexts, focusing almost exclusively on the educated urban elite.

Notably, neoliberalism did not necessarily conflict with patriarchy; rather, it often allied with it in managing social burdens. For instance, as the state withdrew from funding education and healthcare, the burden of care was shifted onto women within families—without institutional support or incentives. Despite the increased participation of women in the labor market, the majority faced various forms of exploitation, including low wages, informal employment, and lack of social insurance, contributing to what is commonly referred to as the "feminization of poverty."

Meanwhile, the Arab feminist landscape underwent a significant transformation. Feminist organizations expanded, but many became reliant on international funding and faced pressure to adopt priorities and agendas that were more "fundable" than rooted in grassroots struggles. The collective pursuit of gender equality was gradually replaced by project-based approaches and measurable outcomes, diluting the political character of feminist discourse.

In Nancy Fraser's terms, Arab feminism at this stage was "smartly co-opted" within the neoliberal system: it was used to beautify the state or open new markets, without having any real impact on the deep structures of discrimination and inequality. In Egypt, for example, policies of "women's economic empowerment" were promoted in parallel with the repression of independent feminist movements. In Morocco, limited legal amendments were implemented, but they did not affect the economic system or regional inequalities. In the Gulf, economic openness was accompanied by the institutionalization of women's roles in soft sectors, without questioning the guardianship system or the lack of political representation. Thus, "empowerment" was redefined to serve political stability and market expansion rather than to liberate women from patriarchal structures or authoritarian hegemony. This situation later became the starting point for a new feminist rebellion with the eruption of Arab protests after 2011.

The bottom line of this phase is that feminism was not explicitly suppressed as in the past; however, it was emptied of its political content and re-produced as a soft, inclusive discourse that served the market and did not upset the authorities, subsequently paving the way for a new transformation.

Neoliberalism and the Enshrinement of Gender Inequality: A Feminist Reading of the Structure of Domination

Here, the analysis examines how neoliberalism has penetrated everyday life and reshaped relationships and roles. The chapter begins with a central premise: neoliberalism produces a dual system of domination—materially through the reorganization of work and care, and symbolically through the redefinition of empowerment and success—and any critical feminist analysis must deconstruct this system on two levels: the economic-analytical and the cultural-symbolic. While deconstructing this structure, the chapter also maps patterns of feminist resistance that emerge from diverse sites and experiences: from fields and workshops to podcasts and articles, from the silent responses of marginalized women to the loud discourses of urban groups. It attempts to map a multilayered resistance to neoliberal hegemony, not as a single unified arena, but as a fabric of narratives, practices, alliances, and organizational models that reimagine the feminist subject outside the grip of the market.

Neoliberalism in the Arab context was not merely an economic policy reshaping the relationship between the state and the market; it became a symbolic cultural system that infiltrates the details of daily life, reshaping subjects, desires, and gender roles within conditions that appear optional but are, in essence, coercive through soft mechanisms. This neoliberal logic has undermined classical foundations of gender analysis, whereby control is no longer exercised through exclusion but through conditional inclusion, conditional

empowerment, and self-discipline, through which women reproduce market roles from within their bodies and minds.

In this context, it becomes necessary to question feminism itself when recast within the logic of individual competence, measurable success, and empowerment tied to consumption.

Neoliberalism reshapes economic and social life according to market logic, establishing a complex pattern of domination that is difficult to challenge with traditional tools of political accountability. Instead of facing explicit discrimination or direct exclusion, women find themselves integrated under hidden conditions and are required to reproduce this system.

The privatization of public services—such as education, health, and welfare—is the first entry point for understanding the structural bias within neoliberalism. As the state withdraws from its social roles, citizens are transformed into consumers, and rights become hostage to purchasing power rather than civic entitlement. In this context, care becomes a familial—that is, predominantly feminine—responsibility, reshaping the gendered division of labor within the market rather than outside it. Nancy Fraser shows that this institutional withdrawal places the daily burden of "reproducing life" on women. In contrast, neoliberalism promotes an individualized understanding of citizenship, where success is redefined through phrases such as "start your own business" or "be your own entrepreneur." Structural contexts that produce discrimination—such as class, gender, or race—are erased, and poverty or exclusion are recast as personal failures rather than the results of structural policies. In this framework, individual empowerment becomes an alternative to the demand for justice, as Catherine Rottenberg explains, describing this trend as "neoliberal feminism." Here, the image of the empowered woman emerges: strong, productive, ideal mother, and attractive—not because she has been granted rights, but because she has adapted to market standards.

"Flexibility" in the labor market is the most misleading concept, presented as an option for women to reconcile work and family. In reality, this flexibility means temporary contracts, unsecured wages, and a lack of union or social-security protection. Women in these forms of employment are often concentrated in service sectors, private education, or the informal economy. A Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung report (2021) shows how women in many countries are pushed to accept such precarious jobs under the pretext of "personal choice" or "functional flexibility," even though this situation reproduces economic dependence within the market rather than alleviating it.

Using Foucauldian analytical tools, neoliberalism transforms into a mode of self-government, where women police themselves, regulating their behavior and bodies for both professional and gendered success. Autonomy becomes an internal demand, not a collective goal, and the individual is reassigned responsibility for well-being, success, and even failure. Nancy Fraser shows that when feminist discourse is repurposed to serve the logic of individual efficiency, it shifts from a tool of resistance into a technology of self-regulation.

Conversely, feminist political economy reveals the paradox inherent in the structure of neoliberalism: women's integration into the market is encouraged, yet the existing division of labor remains unchanged. Caregiving remains unpaid, household chores remain feminine, and professional work is unforgiving of the resulting deficiencies. This produces a pattern of

structural and chronic exhaustion, as Diane Elson describes it, in which women are asked to deliver, appear competent, and care for everyone while expecting nothing in return.

At the intersection of these two discourses—power and feminist economics—the neoliberal female subject is formed: a woman who appears free but is bound by market norms, held responsible for the system's failures, and burdened with an empowerment discourse that appears liberating but deepens subordination. It is a new version of patriarchy: soft, decentralized, exercised not through prohibition but through what appears to be choice and autonomy.

Thus it becomes clear that neoliberalism does not negate gender-based domination but reproduces it through values of productivity, flexibility, and individual empowerment. Liberation is not achieved through unconditional integration but through questioning the conditions of integration and the value system that reframes the self and society. Hence the need for a renewed feminist discourse that emerges from beneath the cloak of the market and reconnects empowerment to justice rather than consumption.

Neoliberal Cultural Hegemony When Women Are Reshaped Through the Market

Under neoliberalism, control over women is not only exercised from outside; it is also produced from within through discursive and cultural mechanisms that shape female subjects who believe they are free while voluntarily subordinating themselves to market logic. Control here is neither legal nor direct. It is exercised through a semblance of freedom: manufactured choices, refined desires, and stereotypes presented in an empowering light, yet concealing the conditions of globalized subordination. In the Arab context, where neoliberalism intersects with patriarchy and cultural colonialism, women are reshaped not only in the economic sphere but also in the symbolic sphere—in language, the body, and promoted representations of success, independence, and strength.

Major marketing campaigns intervene as one of the most potent tools for self-production, not merely as a means of selling products. Campaigns such as “She’s Strong” by NIVEA Middle East, “Women of Gold” by L’azurde, and “Because You Deserve” by L’Oréal Paris function as cultural constructs that convey a coherent discourse. These campaigns use images of successful women while reshaping the meanings of empowerment to fit the market: a strong woman is a beautiful, disciplined woman who balances skincare, jewelry, and individual accomplishment. There is no room here for demanding a fair distribution of wealth, questioning discriminatory laws, or negotiating working conditions. Everything is attributed to the self that chooses, performs, buys, and justifies its subjugation.

The images these campaigns produce are not neutral. In the NIVEA ad, radiant skin becomes a sign of resilience; in the L’azurde ad, value is reduced to the gold that “suits you.” In L’Oréal campaigns, power is translated into expensive lipstick that grants the right to shine. The female subject is reframed as a disciplined individual, convincing herself that her choices are expressions of freedom rather than effects of structural constraints.

Thus empowerment itself was privatized and reframed as consumer choice: no longer a political demand but a brand. Disturbingly, alternative discourses have been subdued and resistance recontained. Foucault described this form of power as highly efficient because it leads bodies to self-monitor and self-regulate without overt coercion. Feminist economics shows that this power extends beyond the symbolism of images to the marginalization of

unpaid labor and the reproduction of class inequalities within female categories. A few women are “empowered” enough to serve as models while many others are excluded from representation and narrative.

These campaigns seem all the more dangerous because the reality of Arab women remains burdened by legal and economic discrimination. Yet they are asked to appear “empowered,” not to become so. “Inspirational” heroines are celebrated and their success attributed to personal willpower, while the structures that enabled or hindered them are obscured. Thus feminism is transformed from a practice of struggle into a marketing license, from a project of change into an aesthetic performance. The problem is not beauty; the problem is restricting empowerment to beauty and excluding “visually unsuitable” women from the representational scene.

As a result, the cultural hegemony of neoliberalism becomes more perilous than its economic manifestations because it infiltrates conscience, reshapes values, and produces a new map of the female self: a consumer, obedient, and disciplined subject that speaks its own language about success but lacks the right to define it.

How do women resist these structures? What are the feminist counter-narratives?

A Network of Voices and Multiple Fronts Countering Neoliberal Hegemony

When asking “How do women resist neoliberal hegemony?” it becomes clear that the answer does not come from a single location nor is it expressed in a single language. Neoliberalism does not exercise oppression through a single force; it infiltrates market relations, language, notions of empowerment, and indicators of individual success. Hence, its resistance is not built top-down but unfolds from the social base and is distributed across a diverse spectrum of practices and representations.

Theoretically and methodologically, resistance should be approached not as a homogeneous or pre-framed discourse, but as a living sphere that moves between silent negotiation, hidden rejection, public critique, writing, theatre, performance, and undeclared collective action.

First: Distinguishing sources of discourse — from grassroots to elite

Resistance is not uniform. There are social and cognitive distances between a peasant woman who refuses to work in humiliating factory conditions and an urban activist who launches a podcast to deconstruct the discourse of empowerment. Yet a common thread of resistance exists. This thread is not measured by theoretical awareness or political rhetoric but by the extent to which it re-questions market systems, tyranny, and patriarchy as mechanisms that conceal control behind concepts of modernity and choice.

In other words, resistance does not begin only at the moment of self-proclaimed feminism. In rural and working-class contexts, resistance is often practised without banners. Women redistribute caregiving roles within their families without naming it liberation. They may withdraw from externally supported empowerment projects if these projects do not align with their life rhythms. These practices, as researcher Fatima Zahra Bennani notes in a field study (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2021), are not only expressions of will but also manifestations of social memory and collective dignity that arise from experience rather than from definitions.

In contrast, urban feminist groups, particularly among the educated middle class, produce consciously critical narratives that challenge neoliberalism in their own language: through articles, workshops, podcasts, and sociological and economic analysis. These narratives constitute a symbolic moment of confrontation within the city but remain threatened by institutional co-optation or reduction to the language of grants and projects.

Grassroots Narratives: Silent Daily Resistance against Neoliberal Hegemony

Beyond media platforms and institutions, women from peasant and working classes across the Arab region produce a form of resistance that does not announce itself through theoretical discourse or digital campaigns. They practice resistance as a life-long response rooted in need, dignity, and collective memory. They do not necessarily identify as feminists nor speak the language of "empowerment." Yet their daily practices often effectively dismantle what neoliberalism attempts to impose as an inevitable fate.

In Morocco, Fatima Zahra Bennani (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2021) documented peasant women in the Souss region who refused to participate in "economic empowerment" projects sponsored by international organisations because those projects required work in cosmetics or crafts incompatible with their agricultural livelihoods. Instead, they established locally managed agricultural cooperatives whose profits were distributed fairly — far removed from the logic of individual profit and market competition. This step was not merely economic organisation but a silent practice of refusal emerging from the fields rather than from conferences.

In Egypt, a study in the Journal of Women and Development (2022) shows that women in rural Fayoum refused to participate in a US-funded small-business project because it burdened them with production without guarantees of marketing or stable income. Instead, they returned to growing vegetables in backyards and selling them directly in local markets. This seemingly simple shift exemplifies what Foucault calls "diffuse resistance": not a direct confrontation with authority but a reshaping of life conditions outside its logic.

In Tunisia, the Association of Democratic Women documented seasonal agricultural workers who refused to sign temporary contracts that forced them to work without safe transport or health coverage. Some mounted limited strikes, while others quietly withdrew and returned to female family support networks. These forms of "silent withdrawal" or "collective evasion," as researcher Iman Al-Hanashi describes them, express a clear rejection of the market's supposedly liberating "flexibility," which conceals deep vulnerability.

What unites these narratives is that they are produced outside central cities, beyond grand concepts and public funding. Yet they cumulatively deconstruct neoliberalism through straightforward acts: the refusal to fold everyday life completely into market conditions. From a feminist political economy perspective, these practices rehabilitate unpaid labour and propose alternative forms of solidarity measured not by apparent impact but by their capacity to create living spaces that do not pass through the market.

Middle-class narratives: resistance through language, organisation, and the restoration of meaning

In the heart of cities, among independent feminist groups, professional unions, and cultural platforms, narratives of a particular kind of resistance are emerging. They articulate a resistance produced from critical consciousness and expressed through literature, memoir, theatre, satire, and personal narrative. While this group possesses symbolic and cognitive capital, its resistance remains threatened by co-optation into market logic or "safe campaigns."

In Egypt, the Socialist Feminist group launched a series of workshops titled "Empowerment Is Not Enough." Participants discussed how the discourse of empowerment is used to justify the state's withdrawal from care, placing sole responsibility for reconciling work and care on women. These workshops included excerpts from hybrid feminist writings — reports, memoirs, and autobiographical texts — reconnecting knowledge with lived experience. The discussions led to pressure campaigns on professional unions that called for concrete demands, such as protection from dismissal and paid maternity leave.

In Tunisia, the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (2023) documented cases of female teachers who began to reject the administratively imposed discourse of "female leadership," which assigns them additional tasks (psychological support, organising activities) without compensation. Some resorted to symbolic strikes: strictly adhering to minimum tasks and not engaging in anything beyond their contract or capacity. This daily practice is a form of soft rebellion against the discourse of individual meritocracy. It deconstructs the illusion of the "strong woman" that beautifies exploitation in the name of empowerment.

This confrontation also translates into cultural narratives. In Beirut, the group Independent Feminists publishes the podcast "Not Empowerment." In one episode, an employee of an international organisation recounts the endless hours required to prove her worth in an environment that perpetuates soft discrimination in favour of men. The episode examines how exhaustion becomes a measure of "success," while women are denied genuine support and recognition. In Jordan, platforms such as Tadamon and 7iber publish critical articles illustrating how the gendered division of labour is reproduced through "micro-entrepreneurship" projects. In one telling piece, a writer deconstructs her sister’s experience of being forced to borrow money to open a home kitchen, without protection or guarantee, as part of an internationally funded programme under the banner of "economic empowerment." The article, despite its simplicity, reconnects empowerment to the realities of the market rather than to the illusion of individual will.

These narratives also appear in literary, cinematic, and visual productions: the mother who rejects the model of the "multitasking woman"; the writer who celebrates her failure not as disability but as liberation from the logic of perpetual production; and the worker who refuses to embellish her profession to make it marketable. In one novel, a cleaning woman says, "I'm not afraid of fatigue; I'm afraid of scarcity." This simple statement amplifies resistance to the discourse of "conditional gratitude" promoted by empowerment projects.

Even on digital platforms, memes and satirical posts are produced that deconstruct the language of advertising, development, and success. Satire here is not mere entertainment but a critical strategy that disrupts the dominant discourse and reconfigures language to reveal its

fragility. It is a form of what Foucault calls "undisciplined discourse," valued not for seriousness but for its capacity to expose the power hidden beneath calm surfaces.

These conscious narratives are distinguished by producing a critical discourse from within language itself, yet they remain aware of the risk of assimilation. Their strength therefore lies not only in eloquence but also in their capacity to question themselves and open horizontal alliances with other, less visible but more deeply rooted feminist narratives.

An important question remains like a leaf seeking a stable home: Do the women seeking change and rejecting exploitation in all its forms recognise themselves as feminists and embrace feminist thought? This question invites a brief pause at the origins of feminism. The linguistic and historical root of the term "feminism" is the Latin femina, meaning "woman." The English term "feminism" derives from this root to denote the ideology or movement advocating women's rights. In 1837, the utopian socialist philosopher Charles Fourier used the term Féminisme to express his pioneering idea that "the measure of women's emancipation is the measure of the general emancipation of society." The term remained marginal until the 1890s, when French activists such as Hubertine Auclert revived and adopted it to describe the movement fighting for women's political and social rights.

From France, the term spread to the English-speaking world, where its first recorded use appears in 1895, referring to advocates of equal legal and political rights for the sexes. In the Arab world, the term entered intellectual and liberation contexts in the early twentieth century and was translated as "feminism." Although Arab pioneers initially used terms such as "women's liberation," the term feminism gained momentum with the rise of global feminist movements and the emergence of Arab writers and thinkers such as Nawal El Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi. These figures helped reframe the concept and localise it within Arab cultural contexts, transforming it from an imported term into an autonomous intellectual movement addressing women's issues in light of their social and artistic specificities.

Feminism and Liberalism: The Relationship between Origin and Transcendence

It can be argued that feminism emerged within the womb of Western liberalism, particularly in the context of the European Enlightenment, which championed reason, freedom, and equality. Liberal feminism developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, influenced by thinkers such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill, and sought to integrate women into the system of individual rights that had previously been the exclusive domain of men.

Liberal feminism concentrated on securing legal and civil rights for women, such as access to education, property ownership, voting, and employment. Among notable figures of this movement are Mary Wollstonecraft, who called for women’s education, and Betty Friedan, who criticised the reduction of women to domestic roles. In this sense, liberal feminism can be viewed as the “legitimate daughter” of liberalism, adopting its tools and methods of thought.

However, this relationship did not endure. Other feminist currents soon emerged that transcended and critiqued liberalism. Radical feminism, for example, asserts that the problem is not only the absence of rights but the structure of the patriarchal system itself, which reproduces male dominance in culture, religion, language, and the body. Socialist and Marxist feminisms link women’s oppression to the capitalist economic structure and argue that liberation requires transforming the entire social system.

Subsequently, Black feminism and postcolonial critiques challenged white feminism's neglect of race and class, insisting that women's experiences cannot be separated from their intersecting identities — Black, immigrant, poor, and so on. In the Arab and Islamic contexts, thinkers such as Fatima Mernissi and Nawal El Saadawi reread religious and cultural texts from feminist perspectives and rejected the wholesale imposition of Western models on distinct realities.

From this vantage, feminism appears as an outgrowth of liberalism that quickly rebelled against it. It has reshaped itself along multiple trajectories, some intersecting with liberalism and others fundamentally opposed to it. Feminism is not a single movement but a diverse intellectual space that continually evolves and re-questions itself and the world. It is a narrative that transcends terminology and reshapes social reality.

One evening, a group of women in a remote village discussed their daily injustices: a plot of land one of them was forbidden to inherit, a school closed to their daughters, and decisions taken without their consultation. None had heard the term "feminism," nor read a book about gender or patriarchy. Yet their words, positions, and silences embodied a distinctly feminist spirit rooted in lived experience and quiet resistance.

Here the true story of feminism begins — not in university halls or international conferences, but in the details of daily life: rejecting injustice and striving for justice even when the struggle has no formal name. Academically, feminism denotes an intellectual and social movement that aims to dismantle structures perpetuating gender discrimination. Practically, it is broader: an attitude, an awareness, and a set of practices that may appear as silent protest, a mother educating her daughter despite family opposition, or a woman writing to demand her right to work.

In non-Western contexts, feminist practices frequently exist without the label, either because the term is unfamiliar or because it carries contested political and cultural connotations. Women in rural areas demand rights to land and inheritance without calling it "feminism." Arab pioneers such as Malak Hifni Nassef and Zeinab Fawwaz advocated for women's education and rights in the nineteenth century, long before the term was widely used in the region. Women in conflict zones lead peace initiatives and defend communities in acts of feminist resistance even when these actions go unnamed.

These examples prompt a recurring question: Is feminism defined by what is said or by what is done? Must one adopt the label to enact its principles? Feminism is not a ready-made template but an open field for reflection and resistance. It is measured less by allegiance to a term than by commitment to gender justice, human dignity, and the right to difference. Recognising unnamed feminists and unlabelled movements is a step toward a more inclusive, humane, and transformative feminism.

Perhaps the time has come to redefine feminism not only as an intellectual current but as a daily narrative written in women's lives — in decisions, dreams, and silent refusals. Feminist thought aspires to a new model of liberation, one more inclusive and attentive to the complexities of human existence. It is a journey from demanding rights to rethinking systems, from entering the world to remaking it.

Cross-Class Feminist Alliances: Between Representation and Juxtaposition

Amid this narrative diversity, a fundamental question emerges: how can a feminist resistance front be built that transcends class and epistemological divisions without reproducing the same logic of hierarchy? How can peasant women who have not attended university meet urban activists versed in analytical discourse without the relationship turning into representation or guardianship? These questions are asked not only in academic forums but on the ground, where experiments try to embody intersecting feminist alliances that rethink the meaning of organising and joint action.

In Tunisia, the Association of Democratic Women organised a series of meetings between urban activists and female agricultural workers in Kairouan to build a shared understanding of economic violence and unsafe working conditions. The language was not the same, nor were priorities identical, but what brought them together was an awareness that neoliberal hegemony operates differently across groups and that confronting it requires a flexible, rather than unified, front. These meetings gradually became a space for collective negotiation in which female workers redefined "empowerment" on their own terms rather than on the terms of external projects.

In Lebanon, the Feminist Grassroots Action Initiative launched the "From Field to City" project, bringing together female workers from refugee camps and feminist activists from Beirut. The project not only documented experiences but also produced shared cultural content: a booklet, an interactive play, and oral storytelling sessions. In this context, marginal voices were not merely granted symbolic placement; tools of expression were redistributed, making knowledge a collective fabric in which all women participate without hierarchy.

These experiences, though limited in number, carry significant political value: they redefine alliance not as uniformity of vision or discourse but as a space for negotiation that respects difference and produces solidarity based on listening rather than translation or appropriation. From a Foucauldian perspective, these moments represent a rupture in the epistemological authority that feminist elites sometimes unwittingly monopolise. From a feminist political-economy perspective, they signify a redistribution of symbolic and political resources, enabling the feminist project to grow horizontally rather than vertically.

Alternative Organisation: From the Pyramid to the Fabric

If neoliberalism exercises hegemony through market tools and discourse, it also shapes feminist organisational forms. Some organisations, even when adopting radical slogans, become part of the logic of the "project" rather than structures of liberation. This prompts a question about form: how is organisation constructed? Who produces knowledge? Who is represented? To whom is the discourse directed?

In recent years, alternative feminist organisational models have emerged across several Arab countries. These models do not seek institutionalisation in the traditional sense; they favour horizontality, grassroots affiliation, and the slow building of relationships over achieving quantitative indicators. In Egypt, for example, small anonymous feminist networks meet in libraries or homes to share stories, restore meaning, and resist producing ready-made reports or slogans. The effectiveness of these networks is measured not by numbers of beneficiaries

or workshops but by their capacity to create ongoing solidarity and reclaim personal voice. In Tunisia, “radical feminist reading groups” have formed, aiming not to mount campaigns but to deconstruct neoliberal discourse thoughtfully and sincerely, questioning concepts such as “measurable outcomes” and “flexible empowerment.” These groups draw on Nancy Fraser’s insights into the intersection of distributive and representative justice and reconnect theoretical concepts with members’ daily experiences.

What distinguishes this organising is that it does not seek to move women from margins to centre under market conditions but to unsettle the notion of the “centre” itself, redefining organisation as a fabric rather than a pyramid, and as a relationship rather than a structure. From a Foucauldian viewpoint, these forms of resistance to neoliberal governmentality deconstruct institutional logic: there is no executive secretariat, no board of directors, no five-year plan, but rather a collective desire to learn, think, and act politically. In Lebanon, the group Women Without Conditions organised a session bringing together domestic workers, artists, and academics without formal sequencing of interventions. There was no traditional agenda; instead, power of expression was returned to participants, and voices were redistributed according to disruptive human impact produced by shared existence rather than according to testimony or status.

While the institutional structure of many feminist organisations requires “writing reports,” “setting indicators,” and “ensuring sustainability,” alternative organising reconsiders the unquantifiable: fatigue, desire, slow time, and unarchived emotions. In this sense, alternative organising represents not merely a different organisational form but a political and ethical project that reweaves feminism outside the grip of the market and the institution. It does not reject organising; it rejects the idea that organising is a means of funding or persuasion. Instead, it restores organising to its original meaning: reordering the world for a just and shared coexistence.

When Resistance Becomes a Fabric, Not a Slogan

In the face of neoliberal hegemony that infiltrates daily life under the guise of “empowerment,” “opportunity,” and “superwoman,” women do not offer a single response, nor do their voices emanate from a unified position or through a single medium. What this chapter shows is that feminist resistance in the Arab context resists hierarchy and centralisation; it unfolds as a multi-stranded fabric beginning with the body, moving through experience, and woven into language, organisation, and life stance.

At the grassroots—among peasant, working-class, and rural women—a silent but steadfast resistance has emerged, dismantling neoliberalism not through slogans but through withdrawal, quiet negotiation, and the production of support and solidarity networks. In the cities, among middle-class groups, resistance takes the form of engaged knowledge, critique, and analysis, producing a conscious discourse that is fragile yet resists absorption of the self into market conditions. Between these poles, bold attempts have emerged to create intersecting feminist alliances that redistribute symbolic power and show that the feminist project grows not through representation but through critical juxtaposition, not through ready-made agendas but through shared listening. Alternative forms of organising have also appeared that practise politics outside bureaucracy, making care, disclosure, and emotion political acts rather than marginal addenda to reason or performance.

Perhaps the deeper message of this chapter is that feminism is not only what is said but what is practised and reinvented day after day. It is not a timeline or a set of impact measures but a space where meaning is created from fragility as well as strength, from silence as well as protest, from understanding as well as opposition.

After reviewing neoliberalism's role in shaping feminist discourse within market conditions and soft assimilation, reclaiming that discourse becomes a political and collective duty. This requires reorienting feminist action toward its political roots—from confronting co-optation to reclaiming collective content—a possible roadmap for the Arab context.

In light of growing signs that feminist discourse is being co-opted by market institutions or state agencies, the role of feminist organisations is transforming into something like a cultural-political defence front. Their mission is to protect meaning and restore a line of struggle that resists symbolic emptying and soft assimilation through the following measures:

1. Immunise discourse from neoliberal emptying a. Adopt critical language that rejects reducing feminism to "individual success stories" and reaffirms that liberation is a collective project requiring the dismantling of oppression structures, not adaptation to them. b. Avoid transforming campaigns into marketing or aesthetic tools; ensure feminist demands are linked to questions of distributive justice, power, and class position.
2. Revive collective experience as a source of discourse a. Build on the experiences of women on the ground, especially marginalised women, when formulating programmes, narratives, and policies. b. Allocate space for oral narratives, diaries, and community stories as sources of knowledge no less important than institutional studies.
3. Question new individualistic patterns a. Critically examine concepts such as "strong woman" and "entrepreneurial leader" when used in isolation from the social and political conditions that exclude the vast majority of women. b. Develop internal tools to deconstruct marketised individualism within institutional feminist discourse, including campaigns, programmes, and seminars.
4. Strengthen political formation within organisations a. Incorporate analysis of economic and social policies, authoritarianism, and power structures into training and development programmes. b. Engage female members and staff in open political discussions about their relationships with authority, donors, and the concept of "safe empowerment."
5. Transform the feminist project into a renewable structure a. Reconsider the organisation's role not merely as an "implementer" but as a critical producer and cultural-social actor. b. Develop internal mechanisms to monitor language and narratives and ensure they align with values of justice, liberation, and accountability.

Towards Reclaiming Meaning: From Repetition of Slogans to Building Collective Action

When feminist discourse is exploited through appropriation or propaganda, reclaiming its content requires reorienting work within organisations themselves rather than relying on slogans. This process begins with recognising that women are not only victims of a system but, at times, participants in its reproduction. The path to comprehensive change does not pass through the façade but through returning to the roots, where women do not merely get

represented but participate, decide, and create a discourse that is not sold or used but actively fought for.

Ultimately, this paper does not claim to offer all the answers; it suggests the opening lines of a path that can be expanded through discussion and study. The narratives and practices examined here can inform—but do not replace—the need for further field research, critical reflection, and the development of methodological tools that interrogate language, representation, and prevailing organisational structures.

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