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Edições Afrontamento | APEM

## **Dossier: GENDER STUDIES AND NEOLIBERALISM: THE LAST 20 YEARS**

**Editors:** Maria João Silveirinha – Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Coimbra (FLUC) and ICNOVA–NOVA Institute of Communication.

Cláudia Álvares – University Institute of Lisbon (ISCTE-IUL) and Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology (CIES)

**Deadline – May 15 2020  
(to be published in December 2020)**



### **Introduction**

Although neoliberal thinking and practices are subjects of considerable debate, most literature agrees that the emphasis on minimal state intervention and the extension of market relations in all aspects of economic activity are central to its project. David Harvey (2007, 23) noted how these ideas have exercised considerable influence over a wide range of US and international institutions and organizations, including education, the media, financial and banking industries and government regulatory agencies. Touching all aspects of our lives, both conscious and unconscious «Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse and has pervasive effects on ways of thought and political-economic practices to the point where it has become incorporated into the commonsense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world». Neoliberalism has thus become an almost total and globalizing regime that supports both the logic of investment and the distribution of public resources and incentives for the formation of a «neo-liberal subject», optimizing the subject's governance according to market rules in terms of efficiency, individual effort and performance.

Brown describes neoliberalism as a «normative reason order» that «transmogrifies every human domains and endeavour, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic» (2015, 10). As a consequence, the withdrawal of the state from responsibility for the economic security of all its citizens, besides transferring risks from the collective to the individual, clearly affects social security and public services. Given the ways in which markets and economic relations are generated by gender, it is women who suffer the most from the impact of these policies, which is why it is key to consider the relationship between neoliberalism and gender, articulated in a way that early on feminists took as an urgent task.

In the early 1980s, Zillah Eisenstein predicted that liberal feminism had a radical future, that the contradictions emerging from women's participation in workforce would make private subordination unsustainable and public discrimination visible, generating an impetus for structural change (Eisenstein 1993). Thirty years later, other feminists, including Eisenstein herself (2007, 2009), recognize that feminism walks the corridors of corporate and state power, but instead of challenging capitalism, it seems they have become more intimate with it. For this reason, particularly in the last decade, some feminists questioned the links between feminism and the neoliberal efforts to build a free market society as well as the co-option of feminism itself by neoliberalism. The debate was open on the extent to which mainstreaming feminism helped to remove any trace of feminist politics (McRobbie 2009) and about the ways in which feminism was becoming complicit with neoliberalism through its focus on 'recognition' claims at the expense of a more socialist focus on redistribution (Fraser 2009). In this regard, it should be reminded that Mainstreaming was adopted as a fundamental strategy for social change at the Fourth World Conference on Women: Equality, Development and Peace, held in Beijing, celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2020.

The link between feminism and neoliberalism has received different names. Kantola and Squires (2012) speak of a «market feminism», Eisenstein (2009) of a «free market feminism» or «hegemonic feminism», Roberts (2012) of «transnational business feminism (TBF)», Rottenberg (2017) of «neoliberal feminism», Elias (2013) of «post-feminism». In the specific domain of communication and media studies, the links between neoliberalism and the media are called «post-feminism» (McRobbie 2004, 2009; Gill 2007), «popular feminism» (Banet-Weiser 2018), or even a combination of both (Banet-Weiser et al. 2019). More broadly, the literature on feminist activism in the neoliberal era is predominantly concerned with the co-option of the former by the latter and with the inability of feminism to act as resistance to neoliberal policies and logics.

When questioning women in the sense of assuming themselves as desiring subjects, enhancing new - and multiple - identities through consumption, to what extent is the neoliberal logic making the responsibility to change the status quo on the individual and not the collective? In fact, the feminist movement, in its intellectual practice and political commitment, depends on a collective mobilized around the objective of changing society according to the interests of all women, instead of private individuals. How is it that a liberal context, which favors the right to be free from State intrusion and which places the emphasis on each person's personal responsibility for his/her own improvement and well-being, is reconciled with a whole feminist legacy that points to women as an «essentialist» collective?

In this edition of *ex æquo*, we reframe these issues taking a look at the last 20 years of the broad field of gender studies under neoliberalism.

It is precisely from the field of women's, gender, feminist studies (WGFS) that important contributions have sought to consider how, for example in the Portuguese context, «the present neoliberal logic has promoted commodification in higher education, individualization, excessive workloads and performance in the academy» (Augusto *et al* 2018, 107; see also Oliveira & Augusto 2017) or how «the growing emphasis on productivity has created opportunities for WGFS but also produced a mood of exhaustion and depression that has extremely detrimental impacts on WGFS academics' bodies, relationships and knowledge production» (Pereira 2019, 171).

At the centre stage of our issue will be the economic rationality that seeks to transform capitalist societies through the promotion of competition and individual freedom. Under the neoliberal regime, governments cease to have a practical or ethical responsibility towards their collective of citizens and relinquish the obligation to level the living conditions of all people harmed by systemic discrimination. Furthermore, instead of instituting policies to promote social and economic equality, neoliberalism calls for individual choice and personal responsibility as antidotes to the barriers of prejudice and discrimination.

But is neoliberalism a singular project or thing, or a «field of forces whose imperfect articulations create spaces for unexpected and potentially disturbing forms of agency»? (Newman 2017, 99)

Going through the last 20 years of the interception between gender and neoliberalism may give us some answers that concern not only gender studies, but the paths of feminisms in the last two decades. Perhaps, as indicated by Prügl (2015, 615), we need to think «the 'neoliberalisation of feminism', recognising the diversity and shifting nature of various feminisms and the fluidity of their boundaries».

It will therefore be important to consider the articulation between the issues of women's emancipation and neoliberalism, assuming «which policies are the best feminist policies, which issues and forms of democracy need to be stressed, which compromises need to be made in the struggle for gender justice and against neoliberalism, are questions that women active in each region and country need to decide» (Funk 2013, 194).

*ex æquo* thus invites the submission of papers that fall within the broad scope of the issues raised here, including, but not limited to, studies on:

- university management, scientific policies and the epistemic value of gender studies;
- challenges of gender studies in face of post-colonial, decolonial and LGBTIQ perspectives;
- implications of feminism critique in the epistemological recognition of gender studies;
- contesting gender studies from multiple sources, among others, conservative anti-gender movements and feminist currents of sexual difference;
- contesting social sciences and gender studies;
- discussion of mainstreaming as a strategy for social change;
- political economy, corporatism, leadership;
- studies on media, journalism, advertising, social networks, consumption;
- studies on post-feminism, popular feminism, and liberal feminism.

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The call for non-themed submissions (articles and reviews) is continuously open.

## *ex æquo*

*ex æquo* is a scientific, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary peer reviewed journal open to contributions of multiple disciplines and currents of thought. Published since 1999 as a bi-annual interdisciplinary journal in the area of Women's, Gender and Feminist Studies (<http://exaequo.apem-estudos.org/page/apresentacao-da-revista?lingua=en>)

*ex æquo* invites submissions of original papers, both to the thematic dossiers and the studies and essays caption, and book reviews. The Journal is edited by the Portuguese Association of Women's Studies (APEM) and is directed to an international audience, accepting manuscripts submitted in Portuguese, English, French and Spanish, from various countries. It aims to ensure that the articles published make a significant contribution to the advance of knowledge. Articles submitted for publication undergo a blind independent review by at least two recognised specialists drawn from a range of countries.

It is sponsored by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) ([https://www.fct.pt/estatisticas/facc/periodicos\\_2002\\_2006.phtml.pt](https://www.fct.pt/estatisticas/facc/periodicos_2002_2006.phtml.pt))

