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The Female Body as a Commodity

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THE FEMALE BODY AS A COMMODITY

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Graduation with Distinction

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Introduction

Equality between the genders is a contentious subject as we strive forward into the 21st century. The idea of gender equality is debatable because of the criteria and conditions surrounding it. Politicians often run for office with calls for support for gender equality. However, their calls often neglect to address who has access to equality, who qualifies for equality, and perhaps, what constitutes equality when some are already miles ahead of others. Do we mean equity instead of equality?¹ Through this question, I am highlighting the similar misunderstanding others may have between equality and equity. It is important to differentiate between equality and equity. Equality means providing everyone the same resources regardless of their current condition, which may not solve the issue of inequality. Instead, it reinvents other forms of inequalities. Equity, on the other hand, means providing everyone different resources to get them to the same destination, which level the playing field so everyone would have access. As such, there is a difference between gender equality and gender equity. Gender equality means different genders are given the same resources despite their different circumstances. Equality does not change the status quo. It does not level the playing field according to what people lacks and needs. On the other hand, gender equity level the playing field and also acknowledges the inequality brought on by social factors like race and class. Because of colonialism, the normative culture has become that of the Western hemisphere; the normalized human race is that of the European; the normalized religion is Christianity, with essentially Europe being the center of the world and considered superior to other countries/cultures that existed before those countries were imperialized/colonized. To foreground my point, gender equality hints at the complicity of women in wealthier countries² purchasing/outsourcing cheaper labor to replace their labor for

¹ Dr. Tammy Birk pointed out to me that equality is a neoliberal concept.

² High-income and middle upper income countries listed in WESP 2018.

their fight in achieving equality. As such, this idea of equality is lopsided and not ideal. This problem intersects with the rise of capitalism. With colonialism being an extension of capitalism, this form of equality contributes to the further subjugation of poor women who are already marginalized by their other social identities. With demand for capital, equality is only possible for those who have accumulated wealth, also known as private property within the capitalist system. Equity on the other hand, calls for the state to provide assistance to those who lacks resources and to provide help according to needs, so these people would be able to achieve their potential and goals at their own means. No doubt that within society, because of economic and political policies and the accumulation of wealth, it is unrealistic to expect equality for everyone. As George Orwell writes in *Animal Farm* (1945), “some are more equal than others.”³ The belief that some are more equal than others contribute to the neoliberal ideology of “equality.” In the 21st century, citizens of wealthier countries⁴ think that with access to education and healthcare, in addition to the ability to seek employment and to vote in elections, women have made much progress towards equality; thus, the assumption that gender equality is within sight and an ideal goal to strive towards. However, censuses provided by national governments have shown that although global progress for gender equality has been made, it sometimes occurs at a cost of further division when race and class are included in the determination. Coupled with further division brought on by race and class, gender equality, it seems, is an ideology that serves just a particular group of people. For instance, in the United States, although black male citizens were ratified to vote in 1870, they were prevented from exercising their voting rights with discriminatory practices well into the 20th century. Even though women gained the right to vote

³ This is a line that has stuck with me since I read *Animal Farm* for my English Literature class back in secondary school. The line points to some of the pigs claiming certain privileges, which the working-class pigs have to support the leadership of these privileged pigs because the privileged pigs said so.

⁴ High-income and middle upper income countries listed in WESP 2018.

in 1920, women of color were met with other discriminatory practices to discourage and prevent them from voting. Women of color did not officially get to vote until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Even today, discriminatory practices are still used to prevent particular groups of people from casting their votes. Through this example, women of color face both sexism and racism, and it demonstrates my point that gender equality is contentious and applies to a subset of people only. Globally, women of color are similarly affected based on their class and race. The racial hierarchy is the same globally, going from white at the top to black at the bottom.⁵

Understanding the global racial hierarchy is important as it has a role on who are determined as the “humans” deserving equality, and who are the “sub-humans” who are declined the access to equality. Although equality is projected as a broad political and social goal, it only serves the agenda of a smaller group of people, such as those at the top of the political and social ladder than it was originally intended while continuing the injustices against another group of people, usually those at the bottom. Such is the disadvantage of equality that it does not address other forms of injustices and the intersectionality of these injustices. It is necessary and important to understand the intersectionality of the multiple forms of injustices because the notion of equality is contingent on several factors and varies from country to country.⁶ Two main identifiable factors are race and class⁷, with class having an overbearing influence because wealth would instantly afford one access to social influence and political power. For instance, bearing that both women’s social identity only differs in class, a wealthy woman may experience equality

⁵ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/sep/20/race.uk> and <https://www.scirp.org/Journal/PaperInformation.aspx?PaperID=74766> for more on global racial hierarchy.

⁶ Another important point to note is that policies that are functional in one country may not work the same in another country. Western political ideology often sees itself as superior and assumes that what works for them would also work for other countries. I think such a mentality enhances the characteristics of neocolonialism. I learnt this from reading Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* in a postcolonial literary class previously.

⁷ Social division based on economic and wealth status.

positively within a society as compared to a poor woman. The wealthy woman would experience and interact with society differently as compared to a poor woman. Broadly, both women may share similar experiences of gender inequality in a capitalist patriarchal system, like limited consideration for job positions, and the assumption that women should be the nurturer at home (providing unpaid labour). However, due to their socioeconomic differences, their experiences with inequality differ. The wealthy woman could hire external help to take care of household chores and nurturing duties while she seeks employment or pursues other endeavors. The poor woman would not have this option. Instead, she would need the job for survival and at the same time, take on domestic duties. The wealthy woman gets to choose because her class status accorded to her through her wealth gives her the advantage of options on outsourcing labor, whereas the poor woman would not have much to choose from, with the decisions made based on survival needs: either she works, or she starves. For the poor woman, working and nurturing are not choices; they are responsibilities to which she is obligated to. As such, between the wealthy woman and the poor woman, one may become the exploiter and the other the exploited based on the differences provoked by their socioeconomic differences. Therefore, the notion of gender equality is a neoliberal ideology that needs to be examined and understood alongside *neocolonialism*⁸ in order to understand the prevalent trend of the female body as a commodity.⁹ Gender equality needs to be understood alongside *neocolonialism* because modern-day slavery was perpetuated by racism, whereby people of color were thought to be lesser than those of

⁸ The term *neocolonialism* was coined by Kwame Nkrumah, former president of Ghana, to describe the practice of using capitalism, international policies and globalization to influence a developing/previously colonized country (lower middle income and low-income) in lieu of direct military control or political hegemony.

⁹ *Commodity* refers to goods or services with an exchange-value derived from the exchange of use-value. In Chapter 1 of *Capital*, Marx explains that goods and services all have a use-value. In a capitalist market, use-value equates to the goods/services to a commodity. A good/service becomes a commodity when it is exchanged with another party to utilize the use-value of the good/services. For instance, the care provided by a parent to their child is not a commodity even though it is a service. However, when the parent hires a helper to look after that child, so the parent could leave the house for to seek employment or to run errands, the helper hired is considered a commodity through the payment given to that hired help with the use-value of money.

European descent.¹⁰ Therefore, this is a common justification for abusing impoverished people of color with harsh labor and modern-day slavery.¹¹ In *Contract and Domination*, Charles Mills explains the intersecting contracts that govern how women of color enter the universe of social contract.¹² Combining Marx, Mills and Carole Pateman's explanations on class, racial and sexual contract, we could understand the position and value of women of color within the power structure and universal contract. Mills argued that men of color or women are considered sub-persons.¹³ Therefore, a woman of color would then become a sub-sub-person, doubled down because of her gender and race. She is doubled down in the consideration as a person. This understanding is important for later arguments in the paper of how the female body becomes a commodity.

Frequently, international committees and organizations like United Nations and Women Thrive Worldwide, have subdivisions like "Spotlight Initiative"¹⁴, "UN Women"¹⁵, and "Women Thrive Alliance"¹⁶ to develop projects and discuss policies based on a wide variety of issues like women's rights, economic disparity, access to clean resources, and education, with the hope that these initiatives would support gender equality in local communities within impoverished¹⁷ countries, while lifting them out of poverty into menial, low paying jobs. However, it should be

¹⁰ Postcolonial feminists reject this thought because such proclamations are the creation of Western liberalism. See chapter 6 of Tong's *Feminist Thought* for further explanation.

¹¹ On the justification of abusing impoverished people of color, see *The Philosophy of Race* Pg. 79 - 135.

¹² See chapter 6, "Intersecting Contracts" in *Contract and Domination* for more on the universe of social contracts.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ A new, global, multi-year initiative focused on eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls.

¹⁵ A UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

¹⁶ Initiative with a global feminist advocacy network with one goal: make gender equality a reality. WTA believes that gender equality can only be achieved through a grassroots-led, bottom-up approach to development that is centered on those most marginalized by patriarchy.

¹⁷ *Impoverished* here refers to economically poor countries ridden of resources, both capital and natural, in a globalized world that promotes free trade and trade agreements between countries. Free trade and trade agreements are extensions of neocolonial practices because they could influence the economy of a country.

noted that even though such policies and projects are initiated with a “kind”¹⁸ intent, they neither contest the larger structure of injustices nor account for long term sustainability and eradication of poverty along with eradication of exploitation and commodification of the people in these impoverished countries. These projects could certainly do much more than simply “including women in the room”¹⁹ or “eliminating violence against women and girls”²⁰ with mere words and a lack of practical action.²¹ Moreover, by lifting women into jobs that are lowly paid, it does not solve the current problem of inequality and injustices. Instead, it sweeps the inherent oppression and inequality under the rug, and simply disguising itself as an opportunity for a better life that caters to the needs of the wealthier countries through their lowly-paid labor. Such neoliberal and neocolonialist approaches are only scraping the surface of a huge problem, which is dismantling the capitalist economy that perpetuates the commodification of the female body. In order to eradicate the commodification and exploitation of the female body, there should be the recognition of injustices through the intersecting factors of gender, race, and class.

To gain an understanding of how commodification of the female body is plausible despite human rights law,²² it is vital to understand how the capitalism system via *neocolonialism* plays an important role in the commodification of the female body. In the pre-industrial society, before

¹⁸ This word is in quotes because *kind* is another contentious subject. In order to be kind, a person has to have a certain privilege in order to perform the act of kindness. And to be kind, it is arguable whether the act of kindness is for the person performing the kindness or the one receiving kindness – who is being helped? Who is drawing the benefits of the act of helping? I have become cynical towards “kindness” when the Black Lives Matter movement was appropriated into the Kindness Matters campaign. It makes me think about the essence of kindness and what it is like to be kind in a hierarchal power structure that continues to disadvantage people based on their nationality, language, gender, race, and religion. In a capitalist economy, I don’t think one could be kind if they did not hoard more than they need, which would enable them to be kind towards those who are in need.

¹⁹ Part of *Women Thrive Alliance’s* Global Giving Project

²⁰ *The Spotlight Initiative’s* tagline

²¹ In *Feminist Thought*, Tong calls for global feminism. She calls for “the removal of all forms of inequity and oppression through the creation of a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally” (233).

²² Referencing the common rhetoric of women’s rights as humans’ rights

high and upper middle income countries gained progress in their countries' pursuit of equality, human bodies were already exploited economically for their sexual abilities and labor capacity. However, as more countries gained independence and self-governance after the Second World War, with the citizens depleted of their land, properties, and resources, the citizens of these countries could barely keep up with other industrialized countries that were also functioning in a capitalist system. Moreover, the servitude mindsets²³ of these countries were informed through the years their countries having been colonized. When the Spaniards colonized Philippines, impoverished Filipinos were used in many of the wealthier households as domestic maids, servants, and service industries that do not require education.²⁴ Such subjugation was thus accepted "as a way of life" because of colonialism. That said, because it is already ingrained in the Filipinos' mindsets, they are not aware of their bodies being commodified by service agencies providing a variety of services to citizens of wealthier countries because Filipinos needed the money for survival. In other words, even if they knew their bodies were being commodified while others drew economic benefits from their bodies,²⁵ because of the need to survive, they do not have a choice but to allow the commodification to take place as a way of gaining a livelihood. Thus, those in impoverished countries may lack the free will²⁶ to decide or

²³ Servitude mindsets refer to the ingrained mindset of "some are more equal than others", whereby those that are lesser have to serve those that are higher ups. See <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1533047/colonial-impact-mindsets/> and <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/unseen-and-unheard/201711/filipinos-colonial-mentality-and-mental-health> for more examples.

²⁴ See further explanation in <https://www.africaresource.com/rasta/sesostis-the-great-the-egyptian-hercules/the-black-roots-of-the-philippines-by-philipino/> and <http://www.getrealphilippines.com/blog/2016/05/maid-philippines-filipinos-abolish-brown-slavery/>

²⁵ See http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/mods/theme_c/popups/mod12t02s02.html for an example.

²⁶ Free will is defined as the ability to choose and think without being influenced by external factors. Philosophers reject determinism's role in free will because if one is forced by circumstances to make a particular decision, free will in such instance is contentious. Thus, free will is nonexistent for those being commodified because their life circumstances have influenced their decision to be commodified. Their livelihood is dependent on their commodification and their only choice for livelihood is to allow their bodies/reproductive organs/sex to be commodified. Their life circumstances have been altered by colonialism and imperialism whereby the land and farms they used to own were taken by colonizers when their

to choose whether to be commodified. They are the instruments of labor²⁷ to be used in a capitalist system.

How is the world “divided” now?

With the collapse of Soviet Union, the world is no longer divided into First World, Second World, Third World, and Fourth World.²⁸ Instead, the United Nations has developed many different classifications to organize countries into groups for different projections and studies, based on differing methodologies and aggregations. For the purpose of this paper, we will be using table E of United Nations’ classification of countries found in the *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2018 (WESP)*.²⁹ Countries in table E have been classified based on their level of development as measured by per capita gross national income (GNI) that was aggregated in June 2017. In table E, countries are divided into four categories: high-income, upper middle income, lower middle income, and low-income. According to page 140 of the *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2018*,

Countries with less than \$1,005 GNI per capita are classified as middle-income countries, those with between \$1,006 and \$3,955 as lower middle-income countries, those with between \$3,956 and \$12,235 as upper middle-income countries, and those with incomes of more than \$12,235 as high-income countries. GNI per capita in dollar terms is estimated using the World Bank Atlas method, 2 and the classification in table E is based on data for 2016.

From table E, this paper will use two countries each from the categories of high-income, upper middle income, and lower middle income in order to demonstrate how the female body is

countries were colonized. Although the colonizers have left, those people never got their farms and land back. Instead, they would have to labor for survival as they no longer own any property or wealth that allows them to be independent of the capitalist system.

²⁷ Karl Marx explains this phrase as objects or things used by labourer to carry out a labour task. Maids become instruments of labor when they are used by their employers for chores while their employers work in other industries for higher income.

²⁸ The notion of a Fourth World is highly debatable because these countries were never officially recognized by the United Nations due to sovereignty issues. For instance, the Cherokee Nation.

²⁹ https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/WESP2018_Full_Web-1.pdf

commodified for economic gains and purposes. With such commodification, gender equality becomes questionable because women in high-income countries and some upper middle-income countries are arguably complicit in the commodification of the female body for those who are in the lower middle income and low-income groups. It is questionable because while women in the high-income and upper middle-income countries seek gender equality, and in some cases are able to join their male counterparts in the workforce, their methods of achieving those equalities overlook their complicity in other forms of oppression of women from lower middle income and low-income countries. And by hiring female bodies from lower middle income and low-income countries to help with domestic chores and reproductive purposes, while neglecting the severity with which these services contribute to human trafficking, these women from high-income and upper middle income countries, are complicit in perpetuating the inequalities they are supposedly fighting against. This problem calls the neoliberal ideology of equality into question. On the other hand, if societies and countries are invested in the goal of gender equity, the potential of the female body being exploited and traded as a commodity might decrease.³⁰ However, this is not the case. This paper does not include countries in the low-income category because a majority of them listed in WESP's table E are either at war with other countries or embroiled in civil war.³¹ This exclusion is not to deny that these countries do not face commodification of the female body. Instead, due to limited information available and pressing humanitarian issues faced by these countries embroiled in separate wars, these countries' primary concern would be

³⁰ This is a hypothetical statement and a goal to work towards because some countries are getting wealthier. They would think that their wealth is brought about through the hard work they have labored and invested. Thus, the general mindsets of these people think that commodification of female bodies is neither a problem nor an issue worth any thought. Their mindsets revolved around the human value of citizens from lower-middle and low-income countries. Because their countries are poor, those people are assumed to be worthless, and when such commodification happens, it is actually a blessing in disguise. I am using this example because I am drawing on previous personal experiences with people who rose up the economic ladder, from lower class to middle and upper middle class. Their thoughts of hiring domestic maids and surrogate mothers rest on the simple thought of, "I can afford it", "these women should be thankful for the possibility to use their bodies to earn a living".

³¹ Some of these wars are debatable, but my paper will not address them.

truce and security. That said, the two countries identified from each of the three categories are the United States and Singapore for high-income; China and Thailand for upper middle income; the Philippines and Ukraine for lower middle income. Each of these countries share some similarities and differences with regards to history, cultural view on race, gender roles, and division of society into different socioeconomic levels. Because of their cultural views on race, gender roles, and socioeconomic levels, these countries have come to accept that commodification of the female body is acceptable for those thought to be lesser than the white/fair, educated, and upper middle-class person. The commodification of female bodies has, therefore, become a resource and an alternative for people in the high and upper middle income to pursue employment, gender equality and their “life goals”.³²

How does the female body become a commodity?

The female body as a commodity has gone through multiple historical phases, and with the advent of a capitalist system, without wealth or private property to rely on, the body becomes a commodity through exchange-value. Friedrich Engels’ *the Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) used Karl Marx’s notes on Lewis Henry Morgan’s *Ancient Society* (1877) to offer an explanation on how society went from matriarchal rights to patriarchal rights. And with patriarchal rights, women’s position in society descended from equals to private property (being owned), and to commodity³³ in a capitalist economy and patriarchal state.³⁴

Friedrich Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) argues how

³² *Life goals* refer to the freedom of pursuing what one wishes while still trying to portray the happy, middle class familial image. This concept is fundamentally flawed in that adherents are so eager to portray a happy family ideal but only at the expense of poor women who have to be away from their families in order to provide them economic support. For these poor women, their occupation and family life cannot go hand in hand. It is a situation of either/or. On the other hand, and with much irony, the employers of these women are chasing that family life and occupation. For the employers, because of their wealth, they can have both the family life and their occupation.

³³ A thing with an exchange-value.

³⁴ Also referred as capitalist patriarchy.

women's status shifted from one of relative equality to subordination based on a woman's social situation. Engels argues that with the rise of capitalism, women's position in society shifted. The primary cause was due to the founding of the modern individual family. Prior to the modern individual family, women occupied a public sphere of communal chores during the prehistoric stages of culture. Engels argues that because women were engaged in communal chores, there was the understanding that men were able to venture outside of the community because women took up the responsibilities within the community. This delicate balance was tipped with the founding of the modern family, which Engels referred to as the pairing family.³⁵ According to Engels, the founding of the modern family refers to pairing marriages between a man and a woman, which for the woman interprets marriage as selling her body once and for all into an unpaid form of slavery (102),³⁶ whereby the wife becomes the head servant. If the family is wealthy and employs many servants for household duties, the wife oversees household chores and all productive³⁷ and reproductive duties. Engels' use of the word 'slavery' in this context is meant to explain how the woman has given herself up into a life of servitude that is not productive³⁸ without the presence of the husband, and because she does not have the ability to earn an income, she is trapped within the marriage and has to depend on the husband for survival. When pairing marriages became a norm, the woman's leadership and responsibilities in a communistic household disappear.

³⁵ *Pairing family* refers to the form of marriage that leads to monogamous marriage between a man and a woman. Engels did not state the time period. Instead, he cited Morgan's notes from *Ancient Society* in 1871.

³⁶ Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) argues that capitalism is able to prosper because of slavery. Industries connected to slavery were able to make their riches quickly because they were able to add value to their trade while paying the slaves either nothing or a minimal amount because the slaves needed work and income to prevent themselves starving to death.

³⁷ Productive duties like cooking and washing which would enable the husband to devote his energy to participate in the economy.

³⁸ Use-value is present, but exchange-value is not. However, the woman having married to the man does increase his exchange-value because he is able to devote his labor and energy into capitalist activities.

Engels' explanation of marriage must be understood in relation to capitalism.³⁹ With the creation of the modern family, women were needed for the purposes of reproduction for the capitalist economy. Before the modern family came about, there were other forms of families such as the consanguine family and the punaluan family. The consanguine family is a form of marriage where the man and woman are married to each other, while sharing relationship with each other's siblings, and all the families live together under one roof. The punaluan family is another form of group marriage that existed in the 19th century among Hawaiians, whereby several related-women marry several men. These men then become their common husbands. From a contemporary perspective, the relationships within the consanguine family and the punaluan family seem complicated and incestuous. The consanguine family existed in the Polynesia area (52). As the consanguine family gave way to the punaluan family, at least to Engels, it existed in Hawaii (52). However, as Engels explain, these two forms of families were "practices of living together in a primitive communistic household" (69) until the "conception arose that sexual intercourse between children of the same mother was wrong" (69). Further explaining himself on the punaluan family advancing into the pairing family, the pairing family allowed the tribe to "develop more quickly and fully than those among marriages between brothers and sisters" (54). In the pairing family, women became scarce with the progression towards monogamy. It is in this arrangement "that there begins the capture and purchase of women" (78). Engels further explains how the pairing family "destroys the communistic household" as "communistic housekeeping means the supremacy of women in the house" (78). As society shifts toward capitalist patriarchy, men are working outside their household more often. In this analysis Engels emphasizes that women were powerful within the communistic

³⁹ For clarity, capitalism in the western sphere.

household, as one woman, along with her supporters, would determine who gets to enter into the community. With the pairing family, the power and role of a woman changes because of the oppressive and humiliating situation she is made to experience with the development of new economic conditions (83).⁴⁰ Mother-right shifts or disappears as private possession in a family rises. Engels states that inheritance had begun in the gens⁴¹ through the mother. However, that shifted when the man got to take his “instruments of labor”⁴² (85) along with him should they separate. According to social customs during the savagery stage,⁴³ the man is automatically the owner of everything within the household through his “instruments of labor” (85). In this instance, Engels explains that the accumulation of private property through the man’s labor has given him power even though the man possessed nothing previously. To sum up this shift in power, Engels states emphatically, “the overthrow of mother right was the world historical defeat of the female sex” (87). With this shift, a woman and any children produced from the marriage are considered as the property of the man, under the “incorporation of unfree persons and paternal power” (88). Subsequently, through the accumulation of private property, the state is looked towards as a form of protection over the accumulation of wealth and properties. Owners of private property favored giving up part of their rights over to the state because the state was able to guarantee them forms of protection which the owners were not able to support for themselves. This scenario could be understood in relation to John Locke’s social contract theory,

⁴⁰ In Chapter IX of Wage-Labor and Capital & Value, Price and Profit, Karl Marx explains, “This is the law that continually throws capitalist production out of its old ruts and compels capital to strain ever more the productive forces of labor *for the very reason* that it has already strained them – the law that grants it no respite, and constantly shouts in its ear: March! March! This is no other law than that which, within the periodical fluctuations of commerce, necessarily *adjusts the price of a commodity to its cost of production*” (43).

⁴¹ Clans within a group that either share their name or blood relation.

⁴² Things used by laborer to carry out a labor task.

⁴³ First stage of Lewis Henry Morgan’s *Ancient Society* summarized by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884).

whereby citizens were encouraged to give up part of their individual rights to the state in return for more protection. As such, societies were divided between different classes of people according to the private property they had accumulated. The accumulation of property thus enabled the production of commodities. Commodities are objects with an exchange-value that can be used to increase one's wealth if they are already wealthy, or if they are poor, these objects are commodified in order to exchange their labor for survival.

According to de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), the female infant is not referred to as the subject. Instead, she is the object to the male's subject; she is seen in opposition to the male, and as such, she is denied her humanity. De Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* affirms Engels' argument concerning the descent of the female sex, from subject to object.

Capitalism and the “Weakening” of Women

Within a capitalist system, the accumulation of private property could elevate one's social status and increase one's wealth. With the boom in industrialization, capitalism began to draw labor out of private homes and into industries for production. Women's labor during industrialization may be explained in two folds. First, those who belong to the lower rung of society have to work for wages. On the other hand, those who are in the upper class do not have to work for wages and can simply depend on their husbands to bring home the income for the family. Women who had to work have to be content with unfair wages within the patriarchal system. The unfair wages arise due to women's position as unpaid labor within the household. Engels explains that such inequalities were supported by marriage through “legal inequality” (104) which produces the economic oppression of women. In the first place, without an income, a woman is powerless. She has to depend on her husband for survival. And because she does not have any power, she does not participate in legislatures that are crafted by those with the power,

i.e. men. Men have the political power due to their “instruments of labor”⁴⁴ (85), which helps them to accumulate private property. Subsequently, as industries require more labor to cater to booming industries, merchants and owners saw the opportunities to increase their profits by hiring women and children, who previously had not been thought of as a source of labor. Their exchange-value was assumed to be zero because they lacked any “instruments of labor” (85). Women and children of poor families were forced to work as daily necessities like food and medication increase in price, and the income brought back by their husbands are not adequate for the household survival. As such, the labors of poor women and children were commodified for the sake of survival.

First, a woman loses her rights over any property she holds as she is oppressed and confined within the domestic sphere. Without the ability to work in the public sphere, she does not have the power to decide her destiny. Instead, she has to rely on her husband and in the situations of married pairs, the woman functions as the head servant, overseeing the other servants in the household, and also functioning as the reproduction machine. When women still enjoyed mother rights, they were included in decision making for the community; descendants went by her name and were part of the council that decided the law of the community. As explained by Engels, when the mother gives birth to the new baby, she has the sole right to the baby as it is accepted into her gens upon birth. Nevertheless, those rights changed with the rise of capitalism. Women’s respected status declined as they were unable to produce the labor force required by the bourgeois class for productive work. Women lacked the exchange-value that is valuable towards capitalism. Having explained how the accumulation of private property played a role in capitalism, I would explain the relationship of commodity to the privat property.

⁴⁴ Things used by laborer to carry out a labor task. At this point, the values of his instruments of labor have increased due to experience and skill accumulation.

Relationship of Commodity and Property

According to Karl Marx, a commodity is defined as an elementary form of wealth.⁴⁵ However, upon further analysis within the context of capitalism, a commodity is an external object that satisfies a need with both the use-value and exchange-value attached to it. Without the exchange-value, the commodity is worthless because it does not have any labor input attached to it. For instance, Mary is asked to wash a car by Susan. Mary's input of labor in washing the car is not considered a commodity even though she is paid by Susan for her labor as it does not increase Susan's capital. On the other hand, if Mary's washing of the car frees up Susan's time, such that Susan could then engage in other activities that would increase her capital, Mary's labor in this case is a commodity because the exchange-value in Mary's labor has allow Susan to earn more capital from Mary's labor. In contemporary times, with women seen as the "natural" nurturer of the domestic household, this role dehumanizes her such that her labors are deemed valueless and her subservient position situates her as the property of the man. How do we understand the relationship of commodity and property? A commodity is commonly thought of as an object that has a value and could be exchanged or traded in a market. Recall Beauvoir's argument on women's position of object relative to the men's subject. Due to her position as the object, the female body, her sex, and her labor are commodified for further output. Essentially, the female body could be commodified for larger output to satisfy the needs in a capitalistic economy. A commodity is the product from a proletariat's labor. And the property is owned by the bourgeoisie's accumulation. In my research, I am arguing that the female body is the property that is owned by the patriarchal figure in the family and also the capitalist state.

⁴⁵ Definition taken from Marxists.org.

Colonialism: An extension of Capitalism

Between the 18th and 20th centuries, capitalism extended its arms of production through colonialism. Colonialism refers to the policy implemented by capitalist countries to exploit “weaker” countries for their resources including human bodies. Across the world, in Asia, Americas, and Africa, colonialism expanded at a rapid rate as European powers sought to gain a foothold in the regions and wrestled control of resources from the native and indigenous populations. Superficially, the European powers have always argued the purposes of colonization as a beneficial way to civilize countries and cultures. However, upon analysis, one could deduce that they colonized other countries for many reasons that were beneficial to the European capitalist powers. Firstly, colonizing countries help open new markets for consumption of the products produced in the European industries. Secondly, after taking control of the colonized countries, the colonizers would have a “rightful” usage of the land, the people as laborers, and other natural resources. This provides a cover-up for the accusation of exploitation. Colonialism also sought to spread the capitalist ideology of produce and consume. After the Second World War, many countries that were colonized started to demand self-governance and independence. These colonized countries recognized the detrimental effects of colonialism and were extremely disappointed in the “strong” western armies deserting them in times of need during the Second World War. After the war, national governments sought to re-organize and to rebuild their countries devastated by the war. However, with colonized countries fighting for self-governance and independence, the colonizers did not have any choice but to allow these countries to regain their independence as many of the colonizers were unable to protect their colonies from invading forces during the Second World War. When the Second World War was over, these colonies realized they do not need to be “protected” by the colonizers because when protections were

needed most, the colonizers deserted their colonies and left the colonies to fend for themselves during the war. In light of this freedom, Kwame Nkrumah, the former president of Ghana, rightly pointed out that countries should not rejoice because now they have to clean up the mess left by the colonizers exploitation of resources and the destruction of cultures and customs for “civilization”.⁴⁶ Nkrumah coined the term *neo-colonialism* to describe this phase. Although these countries have gained independence and self-governance, they are not “free” in the sense of the word. They are simply experiencing a new form of colonialism, whereby these countries have to bear the effects of exploitations and unfair regulations listed upon them by international organizations that are headed by the countries that were once their colonizers.⁴⁷ To understand how colonialism is detrimental to these countries, one ought to understand capitalism and the way it works. Colonialism is an outgrowth of capitalism. As economies picked up after the war, international organizations came together with a list of regulations and aggregations to evaluate the stability of a country.

As many countries regained their independence from colonizers in the 20th century, the general assumption was that these countries were free and could rebuild independently. However, they were extremely wrong when international organizations based on western ideologies started to wield some form of control through regulations and international legislations. Of course, as colonization was an outgrowth of capitalism, it is futile to discuss native and indigenous cultures in this research because the native and indigenous values do not contribute to the female body as a commodity in the scope of this project. They may have had forms of slavery as punishments for rival tribes and groups, but those punishments were only

⁴⁶ Kwame Nkrumah mentions this in chapter 1 of *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. The book was published in 1965.

⁴⁷ Ibid, chapter 4.

meted out as a form of retribution for war. Unlike the supply and demand that exists in capitalism, commodities as described by Marx do not exist outside capitalism. *Neo-colonialism*, as described previously, marshals capitalism, international policies, and globalization to influence a developing/previously colonized country (lower middle income and low-income) in lieu of direct military control or political hegemony. This process is related to the commodification of the female body through the policies and trade agreements wealthier countries have with middle lower income countries, because the value of the female bodies were assumed to be lower, even though the exchange-value could well be the same as those produced by a citizen from a high-income country. However, as the citizen from the high-income country has other employment choices and does not want to work long hours at a lowly paid job, they get to choose and not work these jobs. On the other hand, these women from middle lower income have limited choices, so in order to survive, they would have to take on jobs that have terrible conditions even if there is the promise of good wages.

Exploitations and Commodification

In my thesis, I argue that the two prevalent forms of commodification of the female body today are domestic maids and surrogacy. These two forms of commodification are singled out because of the multitude of problems attached to these three occupations whereby the welfare and conditions of the women are often neglected during their commodification and after the women are milked for their worth. Governments and international organizations often turn a blind eye in enacting laws that would protect these women from harm.

Women in middle lower income countries like Philippines and Ukraine are hired as domestic maids and surrogates/gestational carriers respectively. Because of the poor economic conditions in their countries, they are often forced by circumstances into taking on these jobs

even if they do not want to; they do not have a choice.⁴⁸ In luckier circumstances, they enter these fields willingly. In unlucky circumstances, they are trafficked and forced into these fields because of the lucrative income involved for the traffickers.⁴⁹ Even for those who enter willingly, many times, the service agencies that act as intermediaries would often take a large amount of commission from the women. Thus, even though the women worked hard for the wages paid for the services they provide, they do not get much in return because the intermediaries between them and the people they are working for would take a huge amount of commission from the women. In these instance, the Filipino and Ukrainian women are commodified for their labor and reproductive abilities. Even though they are paid wages for their services, the wages they received are miniscule. A surrogate in America gets paid about \$60 000 US⁵⁰ whereas a surrogate in Ukraine gets \$400 a month, and up to \$15 000 in compensation. \$3 000 - \$4 000 would go to the agency.⁵¹ Although the Ukrainian is paid much less than her counterpart in United States, she is still willing to provide her surrogate service because she does not have other alternatives to escape poverty given Ukraine's poor economic condition ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Ukrainian woman's reproductive function is commodified such that her reproductive function has an exchange-value for the intended parents as they continue with their daily lives and employment while another person is carrying their baby. Because these maids and surrogates are in poverty, they do not necessarily have any free will to speak of moral responsibility in terms of their position in the culture they inhabit. Poverty enhances their

⁴⁸ See "Maid to Order" in *Global Women*.

⁴⁹ For surrogates, see season 3 of Vice, Episode 4 *Outsourcing Embryos* and Forbes article <https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2014/04/04/surrogate-parenthood-for-money-is-a-form-of-human-trafficking/#402e1ab71202>. For Filipino maids, see "Just Another Job? The Commodification of Domestic Labor" in *Global Women*.

⁵⁰ Amount taken from <https://allthingssurrogacy.org/>. Amount differs on demand in some states, while other states do not allow surrogacy.

⁵¹ Information taken from <http://www.familiesthrusurrogacy.com/surrogacy-in-ukraine/>

exploitation.⁵² Many cultures, often stigmatized surrogate mothers because they are carriers of other people's babies.⁵³ Such stigmatization is unjustifiable and has no purpose because it does not elevate the women's statuses and does not help the women leave poverty.

In terms of commodification, Filipino women do not fare any better. They may be treated worse than the Ukrainian women because of the nature of their job. The wages earned by maids are pegged to those of the homemaker. So since homemakers are not paid for their labors, maids are naturally assumed to be a low paying job, whereby they are poorly compensated even though their job could be extremely demanding. Additionally, agencies and employers often cite the inclusion of lodging and meals as a justification for the low pay. However, the agencies and employers do not include the fact that most maids work inhumanely long hours every day, and they are not treated with equal status in the household. Instead, they are deemed lowly and subservient. Often times, they are also abused and treated as punching bags for their employers, probably due to the employers' pent-up stress from jobs. Even so, maids should not be abused. Some employers even verbally abuse the maids because they are maids and demeaned as sub-human. These abuses are abhorrent and disturbing because society does not treat these women as humans, in addition to how capitalism encourages their exploitation of the Filipino women with low wages and inhumane working hours. One problem that is often neglected in these services is the women's health. Although the women are paid for being carriers and domestic labors, the health issues arising from these pregnancies and labors are often neglected or unaccounted for. For surrogacy, intended parents only pay the carriers for the time they have the baby, but neglect the carriers' health afterwards. In both situations, the women have labored but were not paid the

⁵² See Dr. Arthur Caplan's <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/09/22/hiring-a-woman-for-her-womb/paid-surrogacy-is-exploitative>.

⁵³ For more on surrogacy stigmatization, see <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/07/080706194247.htm>

amount their labor is worth. Instead, they were commodified for the capitalistic economy whereby everyone benefits from their labor except themselves. Such exploitation may cease if high-income and upper middle-income countries are interested and invested in equity instead of equality.

High-income and middle-income countries are complicit in the commodification of these women's bodies by the agencies involved because by paying a small amount of money, citizens from these wealthier countries can avoid such labor for a variety of reasons, like the choice to focus on career, spending more times on hobbies, not getting their lifestyles disrupted etc. Some would argue that surrogacy is not an economic or inequity problem because these women are paid a good amount of money for being carriers and they almost do not have to do anything to receive a good amount of money. However, what these intended parents and agencies neglected to factor into the payment is the health issues that may come with these pregnancies and long hours of labor. Some women developed health issues like high blood pressure, diabetes, urinary tract infections, and obesity. On the other hand, with domestic maids, those who are terribly abused may not be able to work a long time and without insurance, she becomes deep in debt from her medical bills. For inhumane employers, some do not give the domestic maids nutritious meals and adequate hours of sleep. Somehow, some people's mentality is stuck on milking the maid's worth because she is living in-house with them. Agencies often cannot be bothered with the welfare of the maids because most maids were duped into becoming maids "willingly", and the agencies would lie to them about fees that do not exist so as to extort money from them, hold them to bondage by retaining their passports. Subsequently, when the maids are employed, they are told to work without pay for more than six months as these maids try to repay the debt to the agencies. Although governments are aware of these exploitive practices, the governments do not

enact laws to deter these exploitative practices because there are no laws to protect the maids in the first place and many of the maids are not aware of the channels they could seek help from. To summarize, agencies and employers/intended parents are all part of the commodification of the female bodies because these women were not paid a fair amount of money for the labor they have rendered. This relates back to my point on how in the wealthier countries, the citizens often fight for gender equality, but neglect to compensate another group of women the equity they deserve. The lack of laws and compensations relates back to the idea of women occupying the private sphere without monetary compensation. By pegging compensation of maids and surrogates/gestational carriers to the private sphere, there is an indication of how women of wealthier countries are simply reconstructing the inequalities onto another group of women.

Conclusion

While high-income and middle upper income countries embrace feminism in terms of equality between the genders, it is time to talk openly of the injustices these wealthier citizens inflict upon the women of the middle lower income and low-income countries. It is extremely disturbing that on one hand, women in the wealthier countries are demanding equality for themselves, and on the other hand, they are being complicit and inflicting severe injustices onto women in the impoverished countries. Instead of only thinking about ourselves, or what affects us directly, perhaps we could start thinking broadly about overturning the extremely self-serving capitalist economic system. Marx states his point brilliantly as to why people should overturn capitalism as capitalism only serves the purpose of a small group of people while everybody else slogs their soul away without being compensated the justifiable amount they deserve. By continuing the commodification of the female bodies, the development of artificial intelligence may well push humanity into a darker place because when artificial intelligence is able to take

over certain jobs by humans, humans might be degraded into darker occupations where they could be exploited and abused in abysmal forms, and paid even meager wages just to scrap through life in an extremely competitive and self-serving capitalist patriarchy.

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