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Using the Lens of Social Reproduction to Reassess the Role of Subaltern Women in the Political Economy of the Arab Region in the Context of Neoliberal Restructuring

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Abstract

Dominant narratives tend to completely obscure the relevant role of subaltern women in the political economy of the Arab region, ignoring the central contribution of working-class women, specifically peasants, the poor and migrants, in reproducing Arab societies and dynamics of capital accumulation, particularly in the context of neoliberal restructuring. It is repeatedly argued that women in the Arab region have the lowest labour market participation rates in the world and that their contribution to economic development is limited, thus conveying the false and simplistic idea that the majority of them do not work. In fact, official statistics only record work that is considered 'productive', namely work that has a monetary value, takes place in the public sphere and is formally registered. Building on the useful insights of critical political feminists who have placed the concept of the labour of social reproduction at the centre of their analysis, the paper aims to make a first attempt to propose a complete shift in the prevailing understanding of the role of subaltern women in the political economy of the Arab region. Focusing on Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon, the paper argues that, in the context of neoliberal policies, subaltern women have become even more central to the reproduction of human life and the maintenance of capital accumulation, while at the same time being at the epicentre of the current crisis of social reproduction. The concept of "struggles over social reproduction" is tentatively explored to show how it could help to make visible the collective agency of subaltern

women by bringing together multiple and heterogeneous struggles within a broader conceptualisation of anti-capitalist struggles.

Keywords

Labour of social reproduction – Arab countries – subaltern women – informal labour – labour struggles

1 Introduction

Dominant narratives regarding the Arab region tend to completely obscure the relevant role of subaltern women in the political economy of the area, ignoring the central contribution of working-class women, specifically peasants, the poor and migrants, in reproducing Arab societies and capital accumulation, particularly in the context of neoliberal restructuring. It is repeatedly argued that women in the Arab region have the lowest labour market participation rates in the world and that their contribution to economic development is limited, thus conveying the false and simplistic idea that the majority of them do not work. In fact, official statistics only record work that is considered 'productive', namely work that has a monetary value, takes place in the public sphere and is formally registered. Building on the rich insights of critical political feminists,¹ this paper will argue that by perpetuating the rigid distinction between production and reproduction, this narrow conceptualisation of work renders invisible the considerable amount of informal and reproductive labour done by women in the Arab region, especially subaltern women, and thus obscures their vital role in ensuring the well-being of their families and societies. Subaltern women in fact are engaged in a wide range of daily occupations that are crucial for the reproduction of human life, including informal wage work, self-employment, family agricultural work, caring for children and relatives, domestic work, and subsistence activities, such as collecting water and fuel, and cultivating food. Moreover, even when the issue of reproductive labour is addressed in dominant narratives on the Arab region, it is not only narrowly defined as unpaid care work,² but it is seen purely as an obstacle to women becoming more 'productive', that is entering the labour market. It

1 Among others, see in this paper Bhattacharya 2017; Fraser 2017; Federici 2012; Mezzadri 2022.

2 Mezzadri 2022; Guérin - Hillenkamp - Verschuur 2021.

is also erroneously treated as a problem of social norms, detached from the broader context of global neoliberal restructuring. Such a narrative once again renders subaltern women invisible in that it subsumes working-class women behind the undifferentiated category of women and, most importantly, treats care work as “unproductive”, ignoring that it reproduces “the most central commodity of capitalism”, that is “labour power”, and is therefore essential to sustain capital accumulation.³

Moving from this premise, this paper therefore aims to make a first attempt to propose a complete shift in the prevailing understanding of the role of subaltern women in the political economy of the Arab region, with a focus on Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon. Drawing on the work of critical political feminists, this paper argues that the reproductive and informal labour performed by subaltern women, while devalued and taken for granted at the level of official narratives, policies and society, is central to both reproducing the wellbeing of Arab populations and sustaining the accumulation of capital, even more so in the context of neoliberal restructuring resulting in state cuts in social welfare, the gradual dismantling of food subsidies and the deregulation of labour.

The paper brings together two strands of literature that have not previously intersected: critical feminist scholars, who have placed the concept of the labour of social reproduction at the centre of their analysis, and the critical area studies literature, which has shed in depth insights on how neoliberal policies have reconfigured state-labour-capital relations in the four countries.⁴ However, within the critical area studies literature, research on working-class women in the Arab region in the context of the adoption of neoliberal policies remains scarce, focused on individual countries and micro-level case studies, and not informed by the lens of social reproduction, with some notable exceptions.⁵ With these gaps in mind, the paper is expected to contribute to the area studies literature in two directions. First, it will enhance our understanding of the role and agency of subaltern women in the Arab region by applying the lens of social reproduction, a theoretical approach hitherto unexplored in the area studies literature, to frame the sparse and fragmented information on working class women, extrapolated from the available sources on the

3 Norton - Katz 2017: 4.

4 As examples of this literature, see among others the works by Adam Hanieh, Ray Bush, Habib Ayeb and Koenraad Bogaert.

5 For example, in this paper, see Bossenbroek - Ftouth 2021; Djerbi 2024a; Hasan 2017; Ravn 2021.

four countries,⁶ within a coherent, cross-country and comprehensive framework that moves subaltern women from the margins to the centre of the region's political economy. Second, by showing how the political feminist paradigm can help shed new light on the centrality of subaltern women in the political economy of the Arab region, the paper will aim to stimulate new avenues for empirical research that could be useful in addressing some of the gaps observed in the area studies literature. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is not to provide new empirical evidence, but rather to interpret the existing one through a new lens that allows to have a better understanding of the role and agency of subaltern women in the Arab region. A context specific understanding of the role and agency of subaltern women in the four selected countries will indeed necessitate that the entire research process, from the formulation of the research questions to data collection and analysis, be informed by the lens of social reproduction in future investigations.

Working-class women are here categorised as subaltern to refer to a diverse group of women, specifically poor, migrant and peasant women, whose vital contribution in regenerating Arab societies and reproducing capital accumulation is systematically invisibilised in dominant narratives, policies and societies at large. As political feminist scholars highlight, the invisibilisation of the labour of social reproduction performed by working-class women is at the root of the “super exploitation of their paid and unpaid labour”,⁷ which feeds capital accumulation, while at the same time generating “an invisible crisis of reproduction”.⁸ It also leads to marginalise them as political subjects. As Djerbi writes in reference to Tunisian women peasantry, it “positions them at the margins of contentious debate” and reinforces a “victimisation discourse” that portrays them as “passive bystanders”, with no voice and agency.⁹ What characterises working class women as subalterns is therefore their condition of being socially, economically and politically invisibilised in dominant discourses and policies, which leads to their exploitation in the context of dynamics of capital accumulation.

The selection of the four countries was motivated by two main reasons. First, the sample reports a relatively high number of studies and evidence relevant to our purpose compared to other Arab countries, which is particularly important given the above-mentioned constraints of the area studies literature. Second, the four countries are emblematic of a diverse group of subaltern

6 The information will include qualitative and quantitative evidence extrapolated from sources provided by academics, international agencies and civil society organisations.

7 Çelik 2023: 17.

8 Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021: 2.

9 Djerbi 2024a:12; Djerbi 2021.

women, all of whom have experienced the most dramatic effects of neoliberal restructuring at the cost of invisibility and therefore exploitation: precarious, informal, low-paid workers (particularly in two major export-oriented sectors, garments and agri-food), poor rural, peasant women, and migrant women workers. Lebanon and Jordan are useful case studies because, in the context of the state's retreat from social welfare, the underpaid labour of migrant and refugee women has become crucial to the social reproduction of the middle and upper classes.

The paper begins with a brief introduction to the critical feminist political framework in order to present its major insights that are considered relevant for enhancing our understanding of the role and agency of subaltern women in the Arab region (section 2). It then applies the lens of social reproduction to the available evidence on the four countries to show how a rethinking of the concept of labour might improve our understanding of subaltern women and to highlight three major trends that seem to have emerged in the context of neoliberal restructuring, but which would need to be substantiated by further empirical research: subaltern women have become even more central to the reproduction of human life (section 3) and the maintenance of capital accumulation (section 4), while at the same time being at the epicentre of the current crisis of social reproduction triggered by austerity and privatization measures implemented under pressure from international agencies (section 5). The final section (6) starts a preliminary reflection on how the concept that Nancy Fraser refers to as “struggles over social reproduction” could help to make visible the collective agency of subaltern women by bringing together multiple and heterogeneous struggles within a more coherent and broader conceptualisation of anti-capitalist struggles rooted in the sphere of social reproduction.¹⁰

2 **How the Lens of Social Reproduction Can Contribute to a Better Understanding of the Role and Agency of Subaltern Women in the Arab Region**

Three important insights relevant to the purpose of this article are offered by critical feminist scholars.

Firstly, the concept of labour of social reproduction allows us to completely reframe the dominant conceptualizations of what counts as “labour”, who are “workers” and “labour exploitation”. It is here understood as the labour that

¹⁰ Fraser 2017.

nurtures future workers, regenerates the current workforce and cares for those who cannot care for themselves. As such, it encompasses a wide range of activities, including at least three forms of labour: (i) the work of biological reproduction; (ii) the care of children, the elderly and others (direct care work); and (iii) the production of goods and services required for the reproduction of human life, such as domestic work, collecting water and fuel, producing food and drink, and caring for the environment.¹¹ As critical feminist economists underline, while the reproductive labour of women, in particular subaltern women, is socially and economically devalued (in the sense that is considered less productive) and hidden (in the sense that it is given for granted), it is nonetheless crucial to both the reproduction of human life and the maintenance of capital accumulation.¹² Precisely, it is essential to sustain capital accumulation in so far as it reproduces “the commodity most central to capitalism”, which is “labour power”,¹³ and it is expropriated by capital, as it is given for free or it is underpaid.¹⁴ In the same vein, some critical feminist scholars extend the discourse of social reproduction to informal work, which is seen as central to “regenerating” human life (particularly in contexts where viable employment alternatives are scarce) and sustaining capital accumulation (to the extent that the costs of production are borne by workers).¹⁵ Consequently, feminist political economy draws attention to the fact that the labour of social reproduction is an integral part of the capitalist mode of production, and that capital accumulation occurs through the exploitation of both wage and non-wage labour, at the point of production and in the sphere of reproduction, i.e. in the home and in the community.¹⁶ As the labour of social reproduction is generally assigned to women and in ways that reinforce existing gender, class and racial inequalities,¹⁷ one can add that subaltern women are not only the most vulnerable to labour exploitation, but also essential to the regeneration of human life and the maintenance of capital accumulation.

Secondly, critical feminists allow for a more nuanced assessment of the central role that subaltern women play in the “processes of regeneration of life and capitalist relations”¹⁸ by expanding our understanding of labour crises under

11 The definition is adapted from Rao 2021.

12 Bhattacharya 2017; Fraser 2017; Federici 2012; Mezzadri 2022.

13 Norton - Katz 2017: 4.

14 Norton - Katz 2017; Bhattacharya 2017; Fraser 2017; Federici 2012.

15 Mezzadri 2022, 2019.

16 Bhattacharya 2017; Sacks 2019; Mulvaney 2013.

17 Bhattacharya 2017; Norton - Katz 2017.

18 Mezzadri 2022: 1232.

capitalism. Indeed, they introduce the concept of “crisis of social reproduction” to refer to a pervasive systemic crisis arising from the sphere of social reproduction as a consequence of the inherent contradictions of capitalism: because of its intrinsic tendency to prioritize profit over human life, neoliberal capitalism is indeed undermining the very processes of social reproduction on which it depends.¹⁹ This is evidenced by the cuts in social spending, the expropriation of communal lands, the degradation of nature and the destruction of subsistence agriculture that are taking place all over the world, threatening the ability of a society to regenerate itself.²⁰ As feminist scholars underline, crises of social reproduction thus arise from taking the labour of social reproduction and its costs for granted.²¹ Since the labour of social reproduction, both unpaid and underpaid, is most likely to be assigned to the most marginalised in society, subaltern women appear to be the primary “shock absorbers” of such crises.²² Thus, conceptualising systemic crises as “crises of social reproduction” allows us to once again place subaltern women at the core of the analysis of the capitalist system of accumulation and its negative effects, highlighting both the crucial role they play in struggling to keep their households alive and the dramatic costs they bear. Also relevant to our analysis is that, as will be discussed later, the invisibilisation of subaltern women’s reproductive and informal labour is both what enables capital accumulation and the cause of the crisis of social reproduction.²³

Thirdly, critical political feminist scholars view social reproduction as “a powerful political concept for understanding the possibilities of resistance and social change and for implementing it”.²⁴

In light of the above, the sphere of social reproduction can be seen as a space where labour exploitation takes place,²⁵ perpetuating “the continuation of capitalist social relations”,²⁶ but also “a space for political struggles”,²⁷ offering the potential for transformation.²⁸ By overcoming the distinction between the spheres of production and reproduction, political feminist scholars broaden

19 Fraser 2017; Rao 2021.

20 Fraser 2017; Guérin - Hillenkamp - Verschuur 2021; Rao 2021; Mulvaney 2013.

21 Rai - Hoskyns - Dania 2014.

22 Fraser 2017; Federici 2012; Norton - Katz, 2017; Rao 2021.

23 Mulvaney 2013; Rai - Hoskyns - Dania 2014.

24 Guérin - Hillenkamp 2021: 8.

25 Guérin - Hillenkamp 2021.

26 Norton - Katz 2017: 2.

27 Guérin - Hillenkamp 2021: 13.

28 Norton - Katz 2017.

the scope of subaltern women's struggles against the exploitative social relations of capitalist domination, thereby restoring their political agency. The above-mentioned concept of "struggles over social reproduction" is used by critical feminist scholars to refer to the struggles arising from the ongoing crisis of social reproduction in the context of neoliberal capitalism and calling for "a massive reorganisation of the relationship between production and reproduction" in a way that prioritises human life over profit.²⁹ From an analytical and political point of view, the concept has the great advantage of overcoming distinctions and hierarchies between struggles, in favour of a broad categorisation of labour struggles that includes both waged and unwaged struggles, those that arise "at the points of production" and beyond, in the community and the household.³⁰ As Sacks well points out, considering reproductive labour as central to capital accumulation allows us to rethink our approach to anti-systemic struggles, based on the premise that the struggle against exploitation takes place not only in the productive factory, but also in the home and in society in general.³¹ As will be seen later, the concept thus allows us to give visibility to the agency of both wage and non-wage workers, bringing into a coherent and unified framework a variety of different, heterogeneous, apparently isolated and more hidden forms of struggles led by subaltern women that are bound together by being struggles to sustain human life.

In brief, the lens of social reproduction can prove useful in better understanding the role of subaltern women in the political economy of Arab countries in so far as it allows us to see working-class women not as 'excluded' groups on the margins of the capitalist system, but as groups central to the reproduction of the hegemonic dynamics of capital accumulation and of societies; to situate their condition of subalternity within the current processes of neoliberal restructuring at both national and global levels, thus illuminating the material conditions of their exploitation; and to enable subaltern women to regain their political agency by making visible the multiple forms of collective struggles rooted in social reproduction.

29 Fraser 2017: 116; Guérin - Hillenkamp - Verschuur 2021; Rao 2020.

30 Mezzadri 2019; Bhattacharya 2017; Fraser 2017.

31 Sacks 2019. See also Rao 2021.

3 Subaltern Women Are Central in the Reproduction of Their Families and Societies

From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s in Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan, and from the early 2000s in Lebanon (in the post-civil war period), under the imposition of the IMF and the WB, governments began to adopt a series of policies in line with the global neoliberal orthodoxy. They have prioritised the restructuring of the public sector, the promotion of private sector-led growth, and the reduction of barriers to trade and financial flows. State cuts in social welfare, the reduction of food subsidies and the contraction of public sector employment, coupled with the proliferation of precarious and informal labour relations, have altered the “reproductive bargain”³² implicitly made between Arab states and their populations in the 1960s and 1970s.³³ The incorporation of the Arab countries into the global market has been an uneven process that has fuelled food import dependency and been based on the outsourcing of low value-added production, such as clothing and food, by foreign companies taking advantage of cheap labour, especially subaltern women. In rural areas, the liberalisation of agricultural prices, land dispossession and privatisation, and the drive for export-led agricultural growth, have led to the progressive marginalization of subsistence agriculture and the impoverishment of the rural population.³⁴ In addition, the severe financial and economic crises that have hit the Arab region in recent years have made the reproduction of households extremely challenging. Against this background, this section brings together the available evidence on three kinds of social reproduction labour for the country sample to argue that, in the context of neoliberal restructuring, which has altered the conditions and organization of social reproduction, subaltern women are likely to have assumed an even more prominent role than before in the reproduction of their families and, more broadly, their societies.

3.1 *Care and Domestic Labour*

The few time-use surveys available for three of the four Arab countries here reviewed show that the responsibility for unpaid domestic and care work falls almost entirely on women. In Jordan and Tunisia, women do 19 and 17 hours of work per week respectively, in contrast to men who do only 1 and 3 hours

32 The expression is taken from Pearson - Elson 2015.

33 For an in-depth analysis of the neoliberal policies discussed here, see Hanieh 2013; Abdo 2019; Chandoul et al. 2022; Martiniello - Kassem 2024.

34 See Hanieh 2013.

respectively.³⁵ In Morocco, women take on 87.5 per cent of unpaid care work, corresponding to 6 times more time than men.³⁶ Subaltern women appear to perform a disproportionate amount of unpaid care work. National time-use surveys from Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, disaggregated by area of residence, show that women in the most marginalised regions actually spend more time on unpaid domestic and care work than women in other areas.³⁷ In Jordan, women in the Northern regions work an average of 24 hours per week, compared with 15 hours per week for women in the Central regions.³⁸ Women in Tunisia's poorest regions (South and Centre-West) spend 24 hours a week on domestic and care work, compared to 13 hours for women in Greater Tunis.³⁹ Moreover, in Lebanon and Jordan, and increasingly in Morocco and Tunisia, the reproduction of upper-middle class families is left entirely to the underpaid labour of the most marginalised women in society, namely migrant workers from sub-Saharan Africa and Asia (Philippines, Nepal, Bangladesh) and girls from poor families.⁴⁰ According to the latest information on work permits issued by the Ministry of Interior, there are 49,437 female migrant domestic workers in Jordan, while in Lebanon, UN data, which is not gender-disaggregated, reports that there are more than 250,000 migrant domestic workers, the majority from Ethiopia, Bangladesh and the Philippines.⁴¹

In order to better appreciate the crucial contribution of subaltern women to the reproduction of Arab societies particularly in the context of neoliberal restructuring, it is useful to highlight that, in the four countries, the total dependency ratio, which includes both children and the elderly, has increased over the last two decades and has become particularly high.⁴² Jordan reports the highest ratio of the population in need of care to the population of potential unpaid care providers, reaching 58 percent.⁴³ This mainly reflects a high child dependency ratio (52 percent), meaning that women are likely to spend most of their time caring for children.⁴⁴ Differently, Lebanon (16 percent), Tunisia

35 UN Women 2020: 66–67. For other data and surveys, see ESCWA 2022: 15; OECD - ILO - CAWTAR 2020; OXFAM 2019; Nazier - Ezzat 2022; Charmes 2019.

36 Charmes 2019: 22.

37 See Nazier - Ezzat 2022; UNWOMEN 2020: 128 (for Jordan), 190 (for Tunisia); Nadah et al. 2019 (for Morocco).

38 UNWOMEN 2020: 128.

39 Id.: 190.

40 See Hasan 2017; Ravn 2021 (for Lebanon); Tamkeen 2015; ILO 2023; OECD - ILO - CAWTAR 2020 (for Jordan and Morocco); Belhassine 2023 (for Tunisia).

41 Tamkeen 2021: 3; Shukr 2023: 7.

42 ESCWA 2022; OXFAM 2019; Hasan 2017.

43 UN Women 2020.

44 UN Women 2020.

(14 percent) and, to a lesser extent, Morocco (12 percent) have relatively high old-age dependency ratios,⁴⁵ with the former country experiencing the fastest growth in the elderly population in the Arab region.⁴⁶ Despite deepening social reproduction needs, in the context of neoliberal restructuring, the public provision of care services for children and the elderly, already historically limited, has remained underfunded in all the countries.⁴⁷ At the same time, the private care sector, which has developed over the years to fill the gap left by the withdrawal of the state, is only affordable for rich families and/or of low quality.⁴⁸ In Lebanon, for example, in the context of a growing elderly population and minimal public welfare provision, it is mostly women who care for the elderly in poor households,⁴⁹ while the underpaid labour of migrant and refugee women has become essential for the social reproduction of upper-middle class, providing a cheap alternative to the lack of public investment in care.⁵⁰ Moreover, public social protection systems covering maternity leave, access to crèches and health insurance, albeit with differences among countries, exclude subaltern women and their families as they only cover public employees and private workers in the formal economy.⁵¹ The care and domestic work of subaltern women living in marginalised regions is likely to be even more vital to the well-being of their families given that, as evidence from Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia shows, neoliberal policies have reinforced patterns of uneven development, exacerbating inequalities in access to health infrastructure and child-care services.⁵²

While more country-specific research using the lens of social reproduction and focusing on subaltern women is needed, in the context of austerity measures and the progressive privatisation of social services, the unpaid care and domestic labour provided by subaltern women is likely to have become even more essential to securing the well-being of their families, given the inability

45 The World Bank n.d.

46 Hasan 2017.

47 Krafft - Selwaness - Sieverding 2022 (for Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia); UN Women 2020 (for Jordan and Tunisia); ESCWA 2022 (for Lebanon, Tunisia and Jordan); Hasan 2017 (for Lebanon).

48 Krafft - Selwaness - Sieverding 2022 (for Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia); UN Women 2020 (for Jordan and Tunisia); ESCWA 2022 (for Lebanon, Tunisia and Jordan); Hasan 2017 (for Lebanon).

49 Hasan 2017; Ravn 2021.

50 Hasan 2017.

51 UN Women 2020; OXFAM 2019; Krafft - Selwaness - Sieverding 2022.

52 ESCWA 2022; OXFAM 2019; Abdo 2019 (for Tunisia, Jordan, Lebanon); Bajec 2020; Gaillard et al. 2022 (for Tunisia).

of poor households to afford private health and care services, their limited access to social protection systems, and their much higher dependency ratios.

3.2 *Family Agricultural Unpaid Labour*

Despite differences between the four countries in terms of the contribution of agriculture to the national economy and lack of official statistical figures, several sources report that women play a central role in subsistence agricultural production as unpaid family labour. According to the few data available, in Morocco almost 70.5 percent of rural women work as unpaid family helpers,⁵³ while in Tunisia women account for about 66 percent of all unpaid family helpers in agriculture.⁵⁴ The sparse evidence for the full sample of countries reveals the wide range of agricultural activities in which rural women are involved, including crop production, animal husbandry and the processing of agricultural and animal products, all of crucial importance for household food security.⁵⁵ They are also the primary responsible for food preparation, collection of firewood and water.⁵⁶ In Tunisia, women in rural areas spend two and a half times more time than men on drinking water collection, transport 84.6 per cent of the water and have to walk long distances: for almost half of rural households, a water source is between 1,000 and 2,500 metres, and for 20 per cent of households this distance exceeds 2,500 m.⁵⁷

In recent decades, in response to the profound changes brought about by the neoliberal restructuring of agriculture, rural women seem to have acquired an even prominent role in subsistence agriculture. With the increasing marginalisation of local food-producing agriculture as a result of the liberalisation of prices, the privatisation of land and the spread of agribusiness, men have generally chosen to migrate in order to support their families and find alternative sources of income, while women left behind have been forced to take care of agricultural production for household consumption and small income-generating activities.⁵⁸ It is in this context that the increase in the

53 Nadah et al. 2019. Data refers to 2017.

54 FAO 2022.

55 Martini - De Pryck 2014; Abdelali - Martini 2011; Augustin - Assad - Jaziri 2012 (for all the four countries); Mellouli 2007; Gaillard et al. 2022 (for Tunisia); Belahsen - Naciri - El Ibrahimy 2017 (for Morocco); UN Women 2018 (for Jordan).

56 Augustin - Assad - Jaziri 2012; Abdelali - Martini 2011 (for all countries); Mellouli 2007; Gaillard et al. 2022 (for Tunisia); Nadah et al. 2019 (for Morocco).

57 FAO 2022.

58 Augustin - Assad - Jaziri 2012; Martini - De Pryck 2014; Abdelali-Martini 2011 (for all countries); Mellouli 2007 (for Tunisia); ATTAC CADTM Maroc 2020; Antonucci 2016; Fischer-Daly - Anner 2021; Sippel 2014 (for Morocco).

female share of the economically active population in agriculture observed in the four countries over the period 1980–2010 should be read, while the male share has declined significantly.⁵⁹

Against this background, there is also scant micro-evidence that the unpaid agricultural labour of women has become increasingly important in coping with recurrent food crises and ensuring the survival of rural households. For example, an ethnographic study of 60 farming households in the village of Bir Mcherga in a semi-arid region of Northern Tunisia between 1987 and 1997 found that as men have increasingly withdrawn from family farm work, daughters and wives have been systematically involved in more labour-intensive tasks to reduce farm production costs and obtain complementary sources of cash income.⁶⁰ In the Jordan Valley, a recent UN survey found that women's increased involvement in subsistence agricultural production has become economically important for their households in order to cope with both declining food imports from civil war-torn Syria and rising food prices on the local market.⁶¹ In particular, for the most economically vulnerable households, those headed by women, the importance of subsistence agriculture as a source of income and consumption is significantly greater than for women who are not heads of the household (88 percent versus 74 percent).⁶²

Furthermore, it should not be overlooked that rural women, with their ancestral knowledge of the use of medicinal, herbal and aromatic plants, as in the case of the Berber tribes in Morocco and the peasant women of Oued Sbaihia in Tunisia show, and with their traditional methods of food preservation,⁶³ as in the case of the *mùne* in Lebanon, are also likely to play a crucial role in protecting biodiversity and food security from the monocultures imposed by agribusiness.⁶⁴

3.3 *Informal and Precarious Wage Labour*

In the context of neoliberal restructuring, in addition to bearing the burden of care and domestic work, subaltern women in the four countries appear to be

59 See table 1 in Martini - De Pryck 2014: 898. The data does not allow to distinguish between unpaid family labour and wage labour. This trend of feminization of agricultural labour is confirmed by different sources: Augustin - Assad - Jaziri 2012; Ben Kahla 2019; Gaillard et al. 2022; Fischer-Daly - Anner 2021; UN Women 2018.

60 Gana 2002.

61 UN Women 2018.

62 UN Women 2018.

63 Belahsen - Naciri - El Ibrahimy 2017; Amayed 2024.

64 For other examples, see Abdelali - Martini 2011; Martini - De Pryck 2014; Montanari - Bergh 2019.

making an increasingly significant contribution to the financial reproduction of their families. In recent decades, in order to cope with the adverse effects of declining food subsidies, galloping inflation and rising unemployment, subaltern women have been increasingly pushed into the informal economy, with no choice but to accept the poorly paid and precarious jobs available. According to the latest estimates, the share of women working in the informal economy, that is without social protection, is 20 per cent in Tunisia, 27 per cent in Jordan, 44 per cent in Lebanon, and 83 per cent in Morocco.⁶⁵ Although men are more likely to be informally employed than women, the latter tend to be in the worst jobs, with low pay and no social protection.⁶⁶ Many poorly educated women from poor families and marginalised regions (in Morocco and Tunisia), as well as migrant and refugee women (in Jordan and Lebanon), have found precarious, low-paid jobs in two major strategic export-oriented sectors, garments and agribusiness, at the cost of high levels of exploitation.⁶⁷ Women make up between 75 per cent (in Morocco and Jordan) and 86 per cent (in Tunisia) of garment workers.⁶⁸ In Morocco, in the areas where agribusiness is concentrated, namely Souss Massa, the Gharb and Loukkos, women have become the majority of workers in the production of vegetables, strawberries and berries, accounting for 90 per cent of the labour force.⁶⁹ In Tunisia, women account for 90 per cent of the harvest workers employed in the olive oil sector, which is the country's main agricultural export.⁷⁰ Micro-evidence on Morocco and Tunisia shows that, in many cases, when husbands are unemployed or absent due to divorce, widowhood or migration, women working in the two sectors are the main breadwinners in the family.⁷¹ In Morocco, for example, the wages of women working in the agro-industrial sector are essential to buy food, medicine, pay bills and educate children, even in families where the husband is still considered the main source of income.⁷² In Lebanon and Jordan, among the Syrian refugee community, an increasing number of women are forced to work

65 Aita 2017.

66 Aita 2017; OECD et al., 2020.

67 Paciello 2023 (for the garment sector in Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia); ATTAC CADTM Maroc 2020; Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021; Medland 2021; Nieto 2014; Sippel 2014 (for Morocco); Bajec 2020 (for Tunisia).

68 Paciello 2023.

69 Sippel 2014; Nieto 2014; ATTAC CADTM MAROC 2020.

70 Barakat 2019.

71 Oufakir 2022; Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021; Bossenbroek - Erraji - El Alime, 2015; Gana 2002 (for the agribusiness sector); Paciello 2023 (for studies on the garment industry).

72 Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021.

in the fields as wage labourers, many of them heads of families who have lost their husbands in the war or come from poorer economic backgrounds.⁷³

4 Subaltern Women Are Central to Reproducing Capitalism

With reference to the four Arab countries included in this study, this section elaborates on another major point made by critical feminist scholars, namely that women's reproductive and informal labour is not only central to human life, but also fundamental to capital accumulation. In particular, the latter "feeds" on the systematic invisibilisation of subaltern women's reproductive and informal labour, which allows the state and capital to make profits both by externalizing the costs of social reproduction and by reducing the costs of production.⁷⁴ The section begins with a series of examples, although not exhaustive, of how the labour of subaltern women in the four countries is persistently devalued and hidden at the level of society and statistics. It then highlights some of the ways in which their invisibilisation benefits the state and capital, particularly through the extraction of large amounts of free labour from subaltern women and the creation of a disciplined female workforce that is easier to exploit.

4.1 *How Subaltern Women Are Made Invisible: Devalued and Hidden in Society and in the Statistics*

At the societal level, the devaluation of the labour of subaltern women in the Arab countries is reflected in the overwhelming attitude that men's paid work is much more important to the family and stressful than women's care work, as the former contributes to the family's financial support.⁷⁵ Moreover, with regard to rural women engaged in unpaid family subsistence farming, although they have increasingly replaced male members in agricultural tasks, they continue to be seen as "helpers" to their husbands rather than farmers themselves, and their activities are seen as merely an extension of traditional domestic responsibilities.⁷⁶ In addition, as studies on Morocco and Tunisia show, when subaltern women work as wage labourers in garment factories and agribusiness, it tends to be hidden by families because it is not well seen in the

73 Turkmani - Hamade 2022; UN Women 2018.

74 Federici 2012: 177; North - Katz 2017; Fraser 2017.

75 ESCWA 2022 and OXFAM 2019 (for the four countries); OXFAM 2021 (for Jordan); Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021 (for Morocco).

76 Abdelali-Martini 2011 (for the four countries); FAO 2022 (for Tunisia).

community, is a sign of poverty and challenges men's role as breadwinners.⁷⁷ For these reasons, female agribusiness workers in Morocco prefer to say that they are housewives, even though they make a vital contribution to the household income, and conceal their identity by covering their faces when working in the fields, hence the nickname "ninja women".⁷⁸ As will be seen below, traditional gender constructs are "fundamental to the accumulation process itself" as they serve employers to motivate the exploitation of subaltern women.⁷⁹ In Lebanon, for example, the low wages of migrant women employed in domestic work are justified on the grounds that it is an extension of women's natural role. In the agricultural sector in Morocco, employers typically pay women 20 to 40 per cent less than their male counterparts for the same tasks on the pretext that they are not the main breadwinners, even though they are the first source of income and they make an important contribution to the country's agricultural production.⁸⁰

The labour of social reproduction of subaltern women is also persistently invisibilised in the statistics: through devaluation, that is, treating their labour of social reproduction as if it were outside market relations, therefore unproductive; and through hiding, that is, treating it as if it were free and unending.⁸¹ A case in point is the inherent tendency of employment surveys to record only formal and 'productive' work (with a market value) done by male nationals. As a result, the crucial contribution that subaltern women make to society and the economic system through their informal and reproductive labour ends up being devalued and hidden behind the category of 'inactive' women ('people outside the labour force' and/or the so-called NEET status, 'not in employment, education or training'), thus conveying the simplistic idea that the majority of women in Arab countries do not work and are "unproductive". National statistics also undervalue the large contribution of peasant women to agricultural production and food security because they do not capture farm activities that are considered an extension of domestic activities. Moreover, there are no recent data on women's unpaid family work in agriculture for Lebanon and Jordan, while data on women's wage labour in the agri-food sector are completely missing for all four countries despite their central role in sustaining export-oriented agricultural production. Similarly, time-use and employment

77 Abdelali-Martini 2011 (for Tunisia); Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021; Bossenbroek - Errahj - El Alime 2015 and Martinez 2016 (for Morocco).

78 Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021; Bossenbroek - Errahj - El Alime 2015.

79 Ghosh 2019: 4.

80 Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021.

81 Frazer 2017; Mezzadri 2019.

surveys erase the vital contribution of migrant women to the daily reproduction of Arab societies by collecting data only on nationals.

As the case of Jordan well shows, the problem of statistical invisibility is particularly evident for migrant and refugee women working for wage on the field, in export-oriented garment factories, and as domestic servants in private homes. Their work is completely omitted from employment surveys since official data on migrant and refugee workers are only estimated on the basis of work permits. According to estimates by the Jordanian Ministry of Labour calculated on the work permits issued, only a negligible number of Syrian refugee women are engaged in agricultural wage labour. However, data recently reported by the Jordanian NGO Tamkeen suggests that at least 20,000 women are employed in agriculture in the Mafraq and Jordan Valley areas alone.⁸² This underestimation reflects not only the fact that Syrian women are less likely to have work permits than men, but also the phenomenon of undocumented women replacing men who, after obtaining a work permit in agriculture, move to other sectors that are perceived to be more lucrative. In addition, Syrian men who secure work permits often bring their wives and children with them to work irregularly in agriculture. The seasonal and informal nature of this work also makes it difficult to accurately quantify the number of female workers, in addition to the fact that Syrian women's wage labour in agriculture tends to be kept secret for fear of shame or honour killings.⁸³

4.2 *How the State and Capital Profit from the Invisibilisation of Subaltern Women*

The invisibilisation of the labour of social reproduction performed by subaltern women in society and in the statistics is reiterated and reinforced in government policies. Broadly speaking, social welfare policies in the four countries tend to prioritize men as financial providers and take women's reproductive and informal work activities for granted. While these policies are detrimental to the lives of subaltern women and their families, they are in line with the IMF pressure to cut public spending and make countries more attractive to foreign investment. Indeed, as critical feminists point out, the overwhelming invisibilisation of the labour of social reproduction performed by subaltern women is functional to capital accumulation in two ways.

First, as Mezzadri notes, it allows the state and capital to externalize the costs of social reproduction.⁸⁴ In this respect, the labour of social reproduction

82 Al-Monitor 2018.

83 UN Women 2018.

84 Mezzadri 2019.

can be seen as a kind of “subsidy to capital”.⁸⁵ Social protection systems are a case in point. Indeed, in the country sample, the overwhelming majority of subaltern women and their families are not entitled to health insurance, childcare allowances, maternity leave and pensions, since they are engaged in informal precarious work activities.⁸⁶ In the context of neo-liberal policies, where social spending has been cut over the years and informal labour relations have proliferated, the exclusion of a large part of the population from the social security system allows the state and capital to significantly relieve themselves of social reproduction responsibilities, shifting them at no cost to families, communities and, above all, subaltern women. This also applies to the public provision of care services discussed above, which remains underfunded. In this way, the state expropriates women’s reproductive labour without paying for it,⁸⁷ and can meet its obligations to international agencies by passing the costs on to subaltern women. Given the large amount of reproductive and informal labour performed by subaltern women in the four Arab countries, it could be argued that without them these states would have to invest much more than they do in the reproduction of labour and human life. For example, a study by *ATTACT* calculated that the domestic and care work of the Moroccan women classified as inactive would contribute to 34.5 percent of the country’s GDP.⁸⁸ In Tunisia, the unpaid care and domestic work performed by women was estimated to make more than 47.4 percent of the country’s GDP in 2006.⁸⁹

In addition, by not recognising the significant role of subaltern women as workers, the state can also perpetuate their marginalisation as economic actors, i.e. deny them their citizenship rights as “recipients of its welfare”,⁹⁰ thus again savings on social security expenditure. To better understand the fiscal advantages accruing to the state and employers, it is useful to note that in Tunisia, like in the other three countries, only a very small number of rural women (93,500) benefit from the social security system that is very small compared to the number of rural women actually working in the agricultural sector, which is around half a million.⁹¹ This is even more the case for migrant

85 Mezzadri 2019.

86 UNWomen 2020; ESCWA 2022 (for the four countries); FAO 2011; Gueddana 2021; Djerbi 2021; Barakat 2019; OXFAM 2019: 57 (for Lebanon); UN Women 2018; The WANA Institute 2021 (for Jordan); Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021; Bossenbroek - Errahj - El Alime 2015 (for Morocco).

87 Çelik 2023.

88 *ATTAC CADTM MAROC 2020*: 32–33.

89 *FIDH 2021*: 17.

90 Rai - Hoskyns - Thomas 2014: 92.

91 Mbarek 2022.

women workers in Lebanon, whose social reproduction is left entirely to private, informal, self-financing groups.⁹²

In this way, incumbent governments can save a lot of money and pass on the costs of fiscal austerity and economic crises to families, especially subaltern women and de facto female-headed households. The COVID-19 pandemic is a vivid example of how this lack of recognition enables the state to contain spending in times of crisis by completely excluding subaltern women working in agriculture, the garment industry and domestic services from state emergency responses.⁹³ In Morocco, during the health emergency, no state financial support was specifically targeted at women agricultural workers, and the few who did gain access to the government's Tadamon initiative in support of vulnerable families did so indirectly through their husbands, even if they were the main breadwinners in the family.⁹⁴ Moreover, as Hasan shows for Lebanon, in addition to saving on care, the underpaid labour of migrant women allows the state to benefit politically by diverting public resources from social spending to finance the patronage of wealthy political elites and capital accumulation projects as well as buying the consensus of upper-middle class women.⁹⁵

The second process through which the invisibilisation of the labour of subaltern women at the level of society, statistics and policies facilitates capital accumulation is that serves to reproduce a cheap, flexible and disciplined female labour force, which can be easily exploited at the point of production to generate surplus value.⁹⁶ In the context of neoliberal reforms, the governments of the four countries have made great efforts to render the labour market more flexible, undermine workers' rights and suppress their freedom of association. The invisibilisation of the labour of subaltern women is consistent with these efforts. Although there are some differences between the four countries, labour laws contribute to invisibilize subaltern women's wage labour by denying informal, agricultural and migrant domestic workers the same status as other workers. This makes it possible to institutionalise gender and racial discrimination in these sectors, thus depriving subaltern women of basic rights such as the national minimum wage, the right to form trade unions and

92 Shukr 2023.

93 For similar findings, see Krafft - Selwaness - Sieverding 2022 (for all countries); Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021 (for female agricultural women in Morocco); Baiec 2020 (for agricultural women workers in Tunisia); Paciello 2023 (for female garment workers in Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco); Kassamali 2021 and Ravn 2021 (for migrant domestic workers in Lebanon).

94 Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021.

95 Hasan 2017; Ravn 2021.

96 Mezzadri 2019.

to be included in the national social security system.⁹⁷ The invisibilisation of the wage labour of subaltern women is also facilitated by the fact that it takes place in spaces hidden from public view and often in remote areas that are difficult for the few labour government inspectors to access, such as private homes, fields, free trade zones and garages. In addition, the labour law in all four countries, albeit with differences, restricts the right to join official trade unions to the formal sector and national workers, which means that subaltern women lack institutional channels through which to voice their grievances, compounded with the fact that existing unions are male-dominated and are biased against migrant, rural and poor women.⁹⁸

In the context of neoliberal restructuring, where competition among local firms across the global supply chain is so fierce and the only way for them to survive is reducing the cost of labour, lack of recognition of subaltern women as *workers entitled of rights* at the level of both policies and society creates a favourable environment to their exploitation. It indeed contributes to legitimize their unequal position in the labour market and weaken their bargaining power vis-à-vis employers. The rapid expansion of the agribusiness, textile and domestic service sectors, in which subaltern women are concentrated, has been made possible precisely by the exploitation of a large reserve of cheap and flexible female labour force.⁹⁹ In the three sectors, subaltern women suffer from working conditions that are among the worst in these countries.¹⁰⁰

The case of female workers employed in agribusiness farms in Morocco illustrates well how the invisibilization of subaltern women, at all levels, allows employers to have at their disposal a flexible, cheap and powerless female labour force from which to extract the maximum profit and survive fierce competition across the global supply chain. Although, unlike the other three countries, Morocco's labour code recognises agricultural workers, nonetheless it grants labour rights, including the right to strike, only to formal workers and sets the national minimum wage in agriculture at a lower rate

97 OECD et al. 2020 (for the four countries); The WANA Institute 2021 (for Jordan); Ravn 2021; Mansour-Ille - Hendor 2018; Turkmani - Hamade 2022 (for Lebanon).

98 Paciello 2023 (for the garment sector in Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan); Kobaiassy 2017; Turkmani - Hamade 2022 (for Lebanon); Debuysere 2018; Djerbi 2021, 2022 (for peasant women in Tunisia).

99 Paciello 2023 (for Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia); Sippel 2014; Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021 (for Morocco).

100 The WANA 2021; UN Women 2018; Tamkeen 2015 (for Jordan); Turkmani - Hamade 2022; Hasan 2017; Kassamali 2021 (for Lebanon); Antonucci 2016; Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021; Bossenbroek - Errahj - El Alime 2015; Sippel 2014; Medland 2021; Nieto 2014 (for Morocco); Bajec 2020; Djerbi 2024a; Belhassine 2023 (for Tunisia).

than in manufacturing. The lack of labour inspectors in rural areas and the low unionization rate among agricultural workers (no more than 0.5 percent) make it particularly difficult to enforce the law and the respect of labour rights. Traditional gender constructs that give women's wage work in agriculture a bad reputation and recognize only men's role as breadwinners are then used by employers to reinforce the invisibility of subaltern women and control over them. For example, female workers working in the sector are reported to be forced to hide their pregnancies for fear of dismissal, while sexual harassment is used to undermine their reputations, creating a silent workforce.¹⁰¹ The exclusion of subaltern women from care services can further contribute to make them more vulnerable to exploitation: Due to the high demands of care and domestic responsibilities, which reduce the job opportunities available to women with children, subaltern women are more likely than men to accept any type of employment, have lower reservation wages and refrain from trade union activities.¹⁰² The above-described dynamics can be also observed in the garment and domestic service sectors in Lebanon, Jordan and Tunisia.¹⁰³ Subaltern women seem to 'regain' visibility in government policies and society only when they are transformed into 'productive' subjects, as in the case of micro-credit programmes and cooperatives targeted at poor rural women,¹⁰⁴ or when they die in road accidents on their way to the fields and commit suicide.

5 Subaltern Women Are at the Forefront of the Current Crisis of Social Reproduction in the Arab Region

As feminist scholars underline, the intrinsic contradiction of capitalism endangers human life, precipitating a pervasive "crisis of social reproduction", defined by Mulvaney as "a state in which the means for a society to regenerate itself are no longer available".¹⁰⁵ At the micro-level, a crisis of social reproduction "results in the impossibility of reproducing the household and the self as demanded by individual and social needs".¹⁰⁶ Mirroring what is happening at the global level, in the North as well as in the South, the Arab region is also

101 Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021.

102 Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021 (for Morocco); Paciello 2023 (for the garment industry).

103 Hasan 2017; Mansour-Ille - Hendor 2018 (for the domestic service in Lebanon); Turkmani - Hamade 2022 (for the agricultural sector in Lebanon); Paciello 2023 (for the garment industry in Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia).

104 Montanari - Bergh 2019 (for Morocco); Djerbi 2024b (for Tunisia).

105 Mulvaney 2013: 28.

106 Ibid.

experiencing its own crisis of social reproduction. Macro-indicators concerning the four Arab countries such as rising levels of poverty, hunger, food insecurity, malnutrition and school drop-out, especially among low-income classes and in poor regions, are all clear signals of a profound crisis of social reproduction that is particularly felt by subaltern women.¹⁰⁷ Against this background, this section draws together the available evidence on the four Arab countries to show that subaltern women are struggling hard to ensure the reproduction of their households and themselves, bearing the brunt of the costs. Given the paucity of studies informed by the lens of social reproduction, more empirical research is needed to better understand the specific forms that the ongoing crisis of social reproduction takes in each country in the context of neoliberal restructuring, how the reproductive capacity of communities and households, particularly female-headed households, has been affected, how subaltern women have reorganised their work across production and reproduction, and how this has ultimately impacted on the well-being of children and themselves.

5.1 *The Reproduction of Their Families Is at Risk*

At the household level, there seems to be evidence for all four countries that the enormous efforts made by subaltern women to ensure the well-being of their families may not always be sufficient to insulate them from the risk of a crisis of social reproduction. The precarious, low-paid and exploitative working conditions in which women work, combined with galloping inflation and recurrent crises (food, health and financial) often make it impossible for them to lift their families out of poverty, send their children to school or ensure a minimum number of calories in the diet.¹⁰⁸ As for women working in the agro-industrial sector, their ability to finance social reproduction is continuously under threat, as their work is seasonal, paid on a daily basis, without a contract, and they receive the lowest wages in their countries, much less than male workers.¹⁰⁹ During the COVID-19 pandemic, although agribusiness production in Tunisia and Morocco did not stop, women's wages were cut significantly.¹¹⁰ As a result, as evidence for Morocco shows, women were forced to reduce spending on their children's health and education, and to find

107 This information can be found in Abdo 2019; Aita 2017; Barakat 2019; Chandoul et al. 2022; Debuysere 2018; Djerbi 2024a; Kahla 2019; Hanieh 2013; Hasan 2017; OXFAM 2019; Ravn 2021.

108 Paciello 2023 (for garment workers in Tunisia and Morocco); Turkmani - Namade 2022 (for Syrian women refugees in Lebanon).

109 Bajec 2020; Mbarek 2022 (for Tunisia); UN Women 2018; The WANA Institute 2021 (for Jordan); Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021; Sipple 2014 (for Morocco).

110 Bajec 2020 (for Tunisia); Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021 (for Morocco).

alternative sources of income, such as working as housekeepers, taking out high-interest loans or selling food.¹¹¹

Similarly, production for subsistence agriculture may not be enough to achieve food security, especially for female-headed households that cannot rely on the income of other family members.¹¹² Moreover, rural women's ability to diversify their incomes and expand the scope of their agricultural activities is severely constrained by their limited access to basic means of reproduction, such as land, and by gender-based restrictions on trading their products outside the village.¹¹³ Evidence for Tunisia also shows that rural women have far fewer opportunities than men to find work in non-farm activities due to very low levels of education, much higher rates of female unemployment and care burdens.¹¹⁴

Neoliberal restructuring has further threatened women's subsistence production through various practices of dispossession, which, as Rao notes, play an important role in generating "crises of social reproduction of labour" in the South.¹¹⁵ The privatization of land, "a key source of social reproduction", is a case in point.¹¹⁶ For instance, in Morocco and Tunisia, much of the communal land on which women largely depend for food and fuel has been expropriated over the years to be sold to companies for large-scale agribusiness, green and tourism, and urban development projects, with women being excluded from compensation.¹¹⁷ Women's subsistence production in rural areas is also severely threatened by agribusiness and mineral exploitation by large companies that have damaged water resources and soils.¹¹⁸ For example, as a result of the pollution caused by the chemical industrial complex *Groupe Chimique Tunisien* in Tunisia, women collecting clams (*laggata*) in the Gulf of Gabes were forced to reduce their harvesting activities, which in many cases was the main source of income in the area.¹¹⁹ As some authors suggest, the inability to secure key inputs such as food, water and land is not only a matter of poverty and inequality, but it may signal "a more complex crisis of social reproduction".¹²⁰

111 Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021.

112 Gaillard et al. 2021 (for Tunisia); UNICEF 2020 (for Jordan).

113 Augustin - Assad - Jaziri 2012 (for all countries); Berriane 2017; Montanari - Bergh 2014 (for Morocco); Djerbi 2024a (for Tunisia).

114 Keskes - Melki 2018; FAO 2022.

115 Rao 2021.

116 Chung 2017.

117 Berriane 2017; Djerbi 2024a.

118 Hamouchene - Sandwell 2023; Djerbi 2024a.

119 Toubia 2024.

120 Çelik 2023: 197; Rao 2021.

5.2 *Subaltern Women's Own Reproduction Is at Risk*

While subaltern women struggle hard to ensure the reproduction of their households, there is evidence that their own reproduction is at risk. As various micro-level studies of the four Arab countries show, subaltern women appear to be experiencing an exponential increase in their workload in order to ensure the well-being of their children and other household members. This is particularly true for those women, who already overburdened with domestic and care responsibilities, are forced to work outside the home for dire economic reasons, without access to childcare services or social security protection. National and smaller-scale time-use surveys in Tunisia, Jordan and Morocco show that when women engage in work outside the home, they continue to be primarily responsible for childcare and housework, with no real change in men's responsibilities.¹²¹ In Jordan and Tunisia, for example, when combining work outside the home and work at home, married women spend most of their time working, respectively more than 65 hours and 49 hours per week, compared to their male counterparts who work between 44 and 53 hours per week.¹²² With specific reference to subaltern women, an OXFAM study in Jordan's Southern region of Ma'an, where poverty rates are the highest in the country, found that working women spend an average 74 hours a week on paid work and unpaid care work, a total of 20 hours more than men.¹²³

Consistent micro-evidence on subaltern women working in the export-oriented garment and agribusiness sectors in Morocco and Tunisia corroborates the above finding, documenting the enormous difficulties and stress they face in balancing long hours in the factory or field with care and domestic tasks.¹²⁴ As the case of COVID-19 pandemic showed for Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan, times of crisis are likely to dramatically increase the number of hours subaltern women spend on childcare and domestic work, with negative consequences for their well-being.¹²⁵ In Jordan and Lebanon, it was migrant domestic workers who suffered an exponential increase in workload due to the presence of all family members at home and the need to constantly disinfect rooms.¹²⁶ Even when working class women are partially relieved of childcare and domestic work, it is always the invisible unpaid or underpaid labour of other women that ensures the reproduction of life at the cost of enormous

121 UN Women 2020.

122 Id.: 33. ATTAC CADTM Maroc 2020.

123 OXFAM 2021.

124 Martinez 2016; ATTAC CADTM Maroc 2020: 32–33; Bajec 2020.

125 Barsoum - Majbourni 2021; Krafft - Selwaness - Sieverding 2022.

126 ESCWA 2022.

sacrifices and exploitation. In Morocco, for example, women working in agribusiness rely on older women in the field or low-cost, low quality informal crèches geared by other subaltern women.¹²⁷ However, this does not relieve working women of the domestic responsibilities that burden them after a day in the fields.¹²⁸

With regard to rural women, the reorganisation of family farming as a result of male migration has meant that they have taken on more-labour intensive and heavier agricultural tasks traditionally done by men as found in Tunisia and Jordan.¹²⁹ Moreover, in Tunisia, the exploitation of water and natural resources by agribusiness and mineral companies in marginalised communities appears to have made water and food collection even more difficult and time-consuming for women.¹³⁰ In Morocco, the well-known case of Zagora illustrates how the intensive cultivation of watermelons for export, leading to a shortage of drinking water, forces women to spend long hours at a small well for a few litres of water.¹³¹

As subaltern women take on the major burden of social reproduction to cope with the negative effects of neo-liberal policies, their physical and psychological well-being appears to be under serious threat. Micro-level evidence from Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia reports that women working in the garment and agricultural sectors are stressed because of financial problems, the fear of being dismissed, the enormous difficulties of reconciling wage labour with care labour that leaves them exhausted after years of work, and the guilt of leaving their children at home.¹³² Their health is further compromised by hazardous and exploitative working conditions.¹³³ In the agri-food sector, for example, women in Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia report that their work is physically demanding because they are forced to work long hours and carry heavy loads, in extreme weather conditions and high temperatures in greenhouses, and are exposed to toxic pesticides without safety equipment.¹³⁴ As a result, they suffer from sunstroke and infections, as well as musculoskeletal, dermatological and respiratory problems, which seriously impair their physical and mental

127 Sippel 2014; Medland 2021.

128 Sippel 2014; Medland 2021.

129 Gana 2002; UN Women 2018.

130 Mellouli 2007; Keskes - Melki 2018.

131 Al-Talbi 2019.

132 Medland 2021; Sippel 2014; The WANA Institute 2021; Paciello 2023.

133 Bossenbroek - Errahj - El Alime 2015; Medland 2021; Fischer-Daly - Anner, 2021; Bajec 2020; The WANA Institute 2021; Paciello 2023.

134 ATTAC CADTM Maroc 2020; The WANA Institute 2021; Bajec 2020; La Via Campesina 2018; Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021.

well-being, both in the short and long term.¹³⁵ In Lebanon and Jordan, female migrant workers face some of the most appalling working conditions, putting their own physical and mental health at considerable risk, as evidenced by the numerous cases of suicide, especially among domestic workers.¹³⁶

In addition, as critical political feminists point out, ecological disruption has a particular detrimental impact on women, since “all environmental issues are reproductive issues”.¹³⁷ In the four Arab countries concerned, while there is ample evidence that neoliberal policies have increasingly exposed rural communities to pollution, little is known about how ecological crises affect the health of subaltern women and their children. A preliminary study of women in the Gafsa region, for example, found that because of the mining activities in the area, women suffer a high incidence of miscarriages and skin problems, while a high percentage of children born with birth defects due to maternal exposure to uranium.¹³⁸

6 Struggles over Social Reproduction: a First Reflection on How the Lens of Social Reproduction Could Help Subaltern Women Regain Agency in the Context of Anti-capitalist Struggles

This last section employs the concept of “struggle over social reproduction” to show how it could help both to give visibility to the collective agency of subaltern women and to bring together multiple and heterogeneous struggles within a more coherent and broader conceptualisation of anti-capitalist struggles rooted in the sphere of social reproduction. From an analytical point of view, based on a review of the existing feminist literature, three different types of social reproduction struggles seem to be relevant to Arab countries: i) classical labour-related struggles; ii) struggles for access to the means of reproduction (water, land, natural resources); and iii) initiatives proposing alternative modes of social reproduction. It is important to stress that, while the area studies literature has dealt extensively with the many forms of labour and social protest that have emerged in response to the broader processes of uneven development induced by neoliberal capitalism,¹³⁹ the collective mobilisations

135 Fischer-Daly - Anner, 2021; Bossenbroek - Ftouhi 2021; Bossenbroek - Errahj - El Alime 2015; The WANA Institute 2021; Bajec 2020.

136 Tamkeen 2015; Mansour-Ille - Hendow 2018.

137 See Di Chiro 2008: 278.

138 Keskes - Melki 2018.

139 See, for example, the works by Habib Ayeb; Alia Gana; Eric Gobe; Koenrad Bogaert; Montserrat Emperador Badimon; Amin Allal; Elisabeth Longuenesse; Matthew Lacouture.

of subaltern women remain an understudied subject.¹⁴⁰ Given the limited empirical research available, this section should be seen as a preliminary reflection on how the lens of social reproduction might shed light on possible future areas of investigation.

6.1 *Classical Labour-Related Struggles*

The few academic studies and the scant evidence in the media show that, in the four countries, over the years, in the context of neoliberal restructuring, women workers in the garment and agri-food sectors, including migrants, have increasingly mobilised, albeit with varying intensity, in response to conditions that threaten their own reproduction, such as deplorable working conditions (long working hours, sexual harassment, road transport, lack of toilets and safety protection) and that of their families (factory closures, wage cuts or non-payment).¹⁴¹ Despite differences in claims, tactics and outcomes, all these struggles appear to be clearly rooted in the ongoing crisis of social reproduction: they have emerged in the contest of austerity measures, privatisation programs and recurrent financial crises. Moreover, by demanding more dignified working conditions, better wages and job security, they are in fact reclaiming an improvement in their “conditions of life for their families”, or in other words, “the reproduction of a different future”.¹⁴²

Regarding the collective mobilisation of migrant domestic women workers, Lebanon is the only one of the four countries where a trade union for domestic workers was established in 2015. The case of *Domestic Workers Union* (DWU), still illegal because domestic workers are not considered workers by the Lebanese government, is an interesting example of how productive and reproductive struggles intersect, and how the lens of social reproduction can help us better capture the wider implications of wage struggles. The protests of migrant women workers in Lebanon appear to have an anti-systemic significance as their demand for labour rights is not only a demand for better working conditions, but also a demand that domestic and care work be valued as work like any other.¹⁴³ By claiming recognition as “workers with rights”, they

140 Among the exceptions, see, in this paper, Berriane 2017; Kobayssi 2017; Debuysere 2018.

141 La Via Campesina 2018; Djerbi 2021; Debuysere 2018 (for women working in the agrifood sector); Paq 2016; Fernandez 2015; Middle East Monitor 2023; Kobayssi 2017 (for migrant domestic women); al-Riahi 2017 (for women working in the garment industry).

142 Hashimoto - Henry 2017.

143 Kobayssi 2017. For detail on their claims, see Fernandez 2015; Paq 2016; Mansour-Ille - Maegan 2018.

are not only demanding better working conditions and an end to the kafala system, but also challenging the general devaluation of domestic work.¹⁴⁴

Another area that would deserve more attention, even if it does not fit the definition of classic labour struggles, is the protests of the unemployed from poor, marginalised regions, which have been a recurrent form of mobilisation in Morocco (since the 1990s) and Tunisia (since the 2000s). The evidence from both countries indicates that it is mainly men who are protesting, demanding jobs and using typically masculine disruptive tactics such as blocking roads. However, as the 2018 protests in Gafsa seem to suggest at a first glance, women are beginning to play an active role in unemployment movements, demanding the right to work for themselves and, ultimately questioning the rigid gender division of labour that gives women the primary responsibility for care and domestic work and, more broadly, the existing organisation of social reproduction. In that occasion, they began to protest against the region's governor because married women were denied the right to work on the grounds that their husbands had already obtained public jobs. In addition to marches and sit-ins, they also launched a petition for collective divorce as a symbolic form of protest to challenge a model of social reproduction that ensures women's access to livelihoods only through marriage.¹⁴⁵

Lastly, framing subaltern women's narratives through the lens of social reproduction can help us to better understand their anti-systemic valence, thus moving beyond mainstream discourses that portray peasant women as passive.¹⁴⁶ As Djerbi reports, the words of a peasant woman in Tunisia asking "Who picks your peppers, your tomatoes, who collects the olives for your oil exports?" illustrate her awareness of that her labour is central to the reproduction of capital accumulation. The fact that during the COVID-19 many of them equated their work in ensuring Tunisia's food security with that of health workers shows that they were aware of how "essential" they are to ensuring the reproduction of their society.¹⁴⁷

6.2 *Struggles for Access to Means of Social Reproduction*

The concept of social reproduction makes it possible to see "the interconnections" between a multitude of struggles that revolves around access to the means of social reproduction, from social services (housing, electricity, water, health services, transport) to protests against the dispossession of communal

144 Kobayssi 2017.

145 See Mabrouki 2021.

146 Djerbi 2021.

147 Djerbi 2021.

natural resources such as land, to environmental struggles against the exploitation of mineral resources and the consequent destruction of soil, water and biodiversity.¹⁴⁸ All these struggles can be seen as a response to “problems of social reproduction” calling for “a broader societal reorganisation of reproductive work”.¹⁴⁹ As political feminists underline, because subaltern women are “primary subjects of reproductive work”,¹⁵⁰ and heavily dependent on access to natural resources and social services, they are most negatively affected by privatisation and dispossession, and therefore more likely to be the first to engage in their defence through grass-root movements.¹⁵¹ The lens of social reproduction therefore allows us to significantly expand the terrain of anti-systemic struggles, from the workplace to the community, where women are more present and struggle daily, and to see them in a continuum and as intimately linked to labour struggles.

As far as the four Arab countries are concerned, struggles over means of social reproduction have intensified over the years, especially after 2011 and particularly in the most marginalised areas.¹⁵² Protests against the exploitation of mineral resources and oil fracking, and the resulting destruction of soil, water and biodiversity are striking examples.¹⁵³ These protests have often also demanded access to collective lands that have been expropriated by mining and agribusiness companies. Protests over access to potable water particularly in marginal areas have multiplied in Tunisia and Morocco. However, the role of women in these protests remains understudied and underestimated, as women are generally subsumed under the category of protesters. Where women’s participation is reported, there is a tendency to present them as “secondary actors”, i.e. as wives, widows or mothers. Looking at these protests through the lens of social reproduction would allow us to recentre our attention on subaltern women and move beyond the idea that they are marginal political subjects because of their reproductive role. Moreover, although men are more likely to be visible in these protests as they participate in sit-ins and road-blocks, women seem to be actively involved in more and more circumstances. This is the case of the protests that began in 2011 against the extraction of silver in the Imider region of South-Eastern Morocco, where the women and men

148 As examples outside the Arab region, see Gutiérrez-Cueli - Martínez - García-Bernardos 2023; Di Chiro 2008; Federici 2011.

149 Di Chiro 2008: 282; Gutiérrez-Cueli - Martínez - García-Bernardos 2023: 5.

150 Federici 2016: 384.

151 Federici 2016; Guérin - Hillenkamp - Verschuur 2021.

152 To have an idea of the many protests in Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan, see EJAtlas n.d.

153 Hamouchene - Sandwell 2023.

of the community began to oppose the construction of a new site by the mining company Managem and a women's committee was set up.¹⁵⁴ Women also seem to be at the forefront of protests when their children's health is directly at risk. This is what happened in 2017 in Bouchemma, in the Gabes region of Tunisia, when women started blocking the road after a gas leak caused serious breathing problems for their children in a school near the industrial zone. A few days later, the whole area went on strike.

The case of the Soualalyate women's movement in Morocco is the best example of subaltern women in the Arab region demanding equal land rights in response to an aggressive eviction of collective lands.¹⁵⁵ In 2007, tribal women began to organise when the communal lands on which they lived were privatised and they were excluded from a compensation scheme that was designed for men only. More recently, in 2021, in Siliana, Tunisia, the Association Million de Femmes Rurales et les Sans-Terre, led by a woman named Turkia Chaibi, was set up to reclaim land appropriated by investors. The lens of social reproduction allows us to see these struggles of subaltern women not only as struggles for women's rights, but also as broader anti-systemic struggles to secure their reproduction against the dispossession of communal lands.¹⁵⁶

6.3 *Alternative Modes of Social Reproduction*

This third type of struggles refers to those that resists capitalist modes of production by providing “more sustainable and fairer modes of organization of social reproduction”,¹⁵⁷ in alternative to “the money economy”.¹⁵⁸ As different authors underline, these initiatives should explore “new ways of doing economics and politics”,¹⁵⁹ imagine “a more just society through a reorganisation of reproduction outside capitalist exploitation”,¹⁶⁰ “redefine our reproduction in a more cooperative way”,¹⁶¹ and be inspired by ecologically sound practices. As Sacks further notes, in order to be anti-systemic, a primary goal of these practices should be “the reproduction of life for itself, rather than in the interests of capital”.¹⁶² These initiatives should therefore aim to rethink “the meaning of

154 Salime 2019.

155 Berriane 2017.

156 Rao 2021; Federici 2016.

157 Guérin - Hillenkamp - Verschuur 2021: 241.

158 Federici 2016: 382.

159 Guérin - Hillenkamp - Verschuur 2021: 9.

160 Sacks 2019: 160.

161 Federici 2016: 388.

162 Sacks 2019: 168.

work and social relations”,¹⁶³ overcome the separation of social reproduction from economic production and be organised according to bottom-up forms of democracy.¹⁶⁴

The concept of “commons”, which refers to “physical or intangible property held in common by groups of people”,¹⁶⁵ is particularly relevant to these alternative struggles. Federici speaks of “collective forms of reproduction”, where reproductive work is “collectivized” and shared in common spaces with “less separation between home and neighbourhood”, and where forms of subsistence production are created that are autonomous from the state and the market, thus giving women control over their health and that of their families.¹⁶⁶ These initiatives could take the form of communal urban gardens, cooperative kitchens and collective organisation of housework and childcare.¹⁶⁷ They could also include examples of alternative forms of subsistence agriculture inspired by the principles of solidarity economy and food sovereignty.¹⁶⁸

As far as the Arab region is concerned, it is evident that civil society networks, workers and local communities are increasingly developing micro-scale initiatives for more sustainable and just societies as an alternative to neoliberalism. Examples of these initiatives include the experience of local self-management in the Jemna oasis in Tunisia and the various forms of agro-resistance practised by small farmers in Lebanon, Tunisia and Morocco, based on indigenous knowledge, inclusive enterprises and local market-based approaches, and aimed at preserving biodiversity against the power of agribusiness. These bottom-up experiences seem to be driven by principles of solidarity, mutual aid, collective ownership and democratic forms of participation that challenge neoliberal principles of individualism, private property and competitive markets. Women appear to be key actors in small-scale food sovereignty initiatives that are essential for social reproduction, such as home gardens in refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon,¹⁶⁹ and bottom-up initiatives to preserve local seeds in Tunisia and Lebanon.¹⁷⁰

With regard to migrant women, networks of solidarity and mutual support have emerged in Lebanon since the 1980s. *Egna Legna* is an example of an initiative born in 2017 and led by Ethiopian migrant domestic workers, who

163 Guérin - Hillenkamp - Verschuur 2021: 11.

164 Guérin - Hillenkamp - Verschuur 2021.

165 Sacks 2019: 168.

166 Federici 2012.

167 Federici 2012.

168 Guérin-Hillenkamp - Verschuur 2021.

169 Tarchahani - Loos 2023.

170 Manisera - Poletti n.d.; Our Seeds, Our Roots n.d.

ensure the reproduction of domestic women themselves by providing them with the necessary social services to fill the gap left by the Lebanese authorities. They provide shelter, legal assistance and training in income-generating activities, as well as delivering food and medical supplies but also a space of solidarity.¹⁷¹

Unfortunately, very little is known about all these initiatives. Future research should explore whether and how subaltern women through these initiatives contribute to the promotion of alternative ideas and practices that move away from the dominant paradigm: for example, how care and domestic work is distributed within these projects, whether they provide examples of collectivisation of social reproduction, and whether and how production and reproduction are reorganised in non-exploitative ways.

7 Conclusion

Building on critical political feminist scholarship, the paper has made a first attempt to better understand the role and agency of subaltern women in the political economy of the Arab region by moving them from its margins to its centre. By reconceptualizing the dominant notion of what counts as “labour” and who are “workers”, and by locating the epicentre of the labour crisis under capitalism in the sphere of social reproduction, it is possible to place subaltern women at the heart of the political economy of the Arab region. In particular, with reference to the four Arab countries, the paper has shed preliminary light on the central role of subaltern women both in the regeneration of human life and capitalism, and in coping with the current crisis of social reproduction triggered by neoliberal reforms. The last section has shown that the lens of social reproduction can also enrich our conceptualisation of subaltern women’s struggles against the exploitative relations of capitalist domination since the home is conceived as “a key site of the production of surplus-value and therefore a key site of revolutionary resistance to capitalism”.¹⁷² This can contribute to expand our understanding of labour struggles so as to include those that take place at the level of the workplace as well as those that take place beyond it, in the sphere of reproduction, the household and the community.¹⁷³ The concept of struggles over social reproduction thus enables

¹⁷¹ Shukr 2023.

¹⁷² Sacks 2019: 156.

¹⁷³ Mezzadri 2022; Bhattacharya 2018; Rao 2021.

us to give agency to both waged and unwaged subaltern women as “revolutionary subjects”,¹⁷⁴ while at the same time bringing together the various, seemingly isolated and separate forms of their collective resistance within the unified framework of anti-capitalist struggles: from classical labour struggles, to struggles for access to the means of reproduction, to initiatives offering alternative modes of social reproduction. Given the many issues left aside due to a lack of studies and data, in order to reposition subaltern women at the centre of the political economy of Arab region and to explore the specificities of each country, it will be necessary to frame future research, from data collection to analysis, through the lens of social reproduction.

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174 Norton - Katz 2017: 7.

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