



THE NEXT SYSTEM PROJECT

WORKING PAPER

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TOWARDS GENDER LIBERATION

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INTRODUCTION: THE NECESSITY OF SYSTEM CHANGE

We are in a time of deepening systemic crisis. Throughout the world, we see staggering levels of economic inequality, unchecked extractive behavior by corporate-dominated industries, overt attacks on civil rights, massive and ongoing violence against women and people of color, deteriorating democracy, heightened militarization, endless wars, rapidly advancing climate change—and the list goes on.

Unfortunately, the system that has produced this crisis isn't "broken." In fact, the mounting challenges we face are to a large degree its natural byproducts and intended outcomes. Therefore, we cannot simply wait for the system to correct itself, or hope that by working at the margins for piecemeal reforms we will alter its fundamental outcomes. Instead we must think deeply about what we want to replace the current system with, and then work to establish the

new institutions, practices, and customs required to make this vision a reality.

The following working paper focuses on gender-based oppression, since it is both one of the fundamental characteristics of the current system and one that must be eliminated from any desirable alternative future system. In the first section it attempts to provide working definitions for key terms—a challenging task in an evolving subject area in which it is important to capture and preserve nuance. A brief outline of some of the pertinent recent historic struggles for gender equality follows, leading to a more detailed overview of the many ways in which gender oppression is occurring within the current system.

In the second half, the paper turns to visions for the future. I argue that system models—that is, models that operate at the level of the system as a whole and consider all of its layers—are important both for clarifying exactly *what we want*, and for determining *how we might get there* by identifying plausible transitional steps towards a next system. Although there are very few (if any) systemic models that prioritize achieving gender equality, the paper will go on to consider and critique the few models—and components of models—that do. Among these are social democratic reforms,

community and place-based strategies, and feminist postwork theories.

Finding none of the current approaches fully adequate to the challenge of a next system based on gender equality, the paper concludes by calling for further work in this regard, and presents some of the key questions and areas for exploration emerging from this study that will be necessary for achieving gender liberation through system change.

DEFINITIONS

Establishing precise definitions can be difficult, especially for terms like “gender” whose meanings are largely, if not entirely, socially constructed. Indeed, it is precisely when terms reflect social constructions that definitions become most important, since older, “traditional” definitions often support unacknowledged existing prejudices and power structures, while newer definitions are often used as tools to reveal and combat those same structures. The following section will attempt to capture the modern, more complete but still evolving definition of the term “gender”—and also consider what is meant here by “the system” in a bit more depth.

Gender

A person’s **sex** is typically assigned at birth and restricted to either

“male” or “female.” While it is argued that the assignment is based on the anatomy of an individual’s genitalia and chromosomal composition, even those whose anatomy or chromosomal composition falls outside of the medical definition of “male” and “female”—such as intersex individuals—are typically still assigned to one of the two categories.

In contrast, **gender** refers to the socially constructed roles assigned to, and/or characteristics attributed to, each sex. “Gender” is often also used as an abbreviation for **gender identity**, which is an individual’s personal perception of his, her, or their own gender.¹ If a person’s gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth, that person is **cisgender**. If a person’s gender identity is not the same as the sex they were assigned, they are **transgender**. It is also important to note that a person’s gender identity can change over time.

Furthermore, people who identify as transgender do not necessarily identify as male or female. Indeed, there are many gender identities outside the binary that non-cisgender people may identify as. The term **trans*** has arisen to reflect this multitude of possibilities. Some of the gender identities that it represents are: transgender, transsexual, trans woman, trans man, trans feminine,

The History of Gender as Nonbinary

It would—as with all norms—be a mistake to assume that the current dominant gender norms have existed for all of history and in all parts of the world. Indeed, seeing gender as a binary has its own history, and did not exist in many past societies. This included among many peoples in the Americas, including the Olmec, Aztec, Inca and Maya, who all recognized at least a third gender. In addition, there are many modern societies that retain a tradition of nonbinary gender, including many South Asian nations that officially have a third gender category. Similarly, the Muxe of the Zapotec indigenous society in Mexico have also historically recognized gender as nonbinary, and continue to do so today.

trans masculine, genderqueer, bigender, third gender, genderfuck, gender fluid, genderless, MtF, FtM, Two Spirit, non-binary, androgynous, and masculine of center (MOC).²

Gender expression is a term used to describe the external appearance of an individual’s gender, which is typically expressed through “behavior, clothing, haircut or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine.”³ A person’s gender expression also may or may not match their gender identity, and like one’s gender identity, can be fluid. It is also important to remember that many trans* people do not feel that they can match their gender expression to their gender identity at all times (or even

at any time) due to the very real threat of violence that they often face.

Gender and Sexual Orientation

Although sometimes conflated, gender and sexual orientation are separate aspects of a person's identity. **Sexual orientation** refers to one's emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people.⁴ Like genders, there are many sexual orientations, including: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, polysexual, queer, non-heterosexual, androphilia, and gynephilia. Like gender identity and gender expression, a person's sexual orientation can also change over time.

Evolving Definitions

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the commonly recognized definition of "gender" has changed substantially over time. While it is difficult to guess how gender was conceptualized in earlier periods of human history, so-called "traditional" definitions have dominated many cultures around the world for at least the last few millennia. As this definition is still dominant, it remains familiar: based on the appearance of genitalia at birth, persons are considered either "men" or "women," and thus to possess particular physical, emotional, and intellectual traits that are

believe to be natural and desirable to each; men, for example, are thought to be more intelligent, less emotional, and physically stronger than women. Women, on the other hand, are thought to be less intelligent, more emotional, and physically weaker than men. Additional characteristics assigned to traditional notions of what it is to be a "man" or "woman" only add to this trend of portraying women as inferior to men.

Women's status as an inferior class has, at least for the last few millennia, included a gendered division of labor in which women perform most of the care work in society. Even today, most care work remains unpaid, and that which is paid is often poorly compensated. (For more on women and paid and unpaid work today, see the section "Gender and Work" below.) In addition, women's inferior status has been maintained and reinforced through significant oppression, including, often, the lack of basic rights. (For more on women's rights today, see the section "Rights and Representation" below.) The enforcement of the traditional, binary definition of gender has thus contributed to the perpetuation of **patriarchal** systems, in which men's dominant position in society is reinforced materially and ideologically.

The Current System

It might be even more difficult to arrive at a definition for the current system than it is for the term “gender.” In general, a system is a series of interrelated parts (people, processes, institutions, etc.) that exist as a functioning whole. Examples of familiar systems include ecosystems (tropical rainforest, desert, tundra, etc.), political systems (democracy, monarchy, oligarchy, etc.), and economic systems (traditional, market, planned, etc.).

Although particular systems must have boundaries, they can also overlap with other systems, including systems of the same “type.” For example, while feudalism and capitalism are both considered distinct political-economic systems, they did, for a time, coexist. Today, capitalism has spread throughout most of the world, and in a sense its particular modern-day form is what we are talking about when we say “the system.” However, while “capitalism” is commonly used to refer exclusively to certain economic practices (private ownership of the means of production, competitive markets, etc.), the system referred to in this paper—and generally in the work of The Next System Project—certainly extends beyond these, to the political economy as a whole, and particularly to the social

relations and culture that support it. These include the well-documented class structure of capitalism, in which most people are forced to work (or sell their labor power) in order to survive. However, it also includes the particular versions of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism, and other forms of institutionalized oppression that we see today. And of course, the current system is also patriarchal, with men continuing to hold a disproportionately dominant position in society.

The particular versions of imperialism and militarism that we see today—which enforce current social relations through violence and terror—are also part of the current system. (See “The Effects of Imperialism” below.) In addition, the impact that the current political-economic system has on our environment, including anthropogenic climate change, is also part of “the system” itself. Many of the underlying economic mechanisms of the current system—including the profit motive, the process of capital accumulation, and the limited way that value is perceived and measured—have directly impacted not only the development of climate change as a phenomenon, but also its perpetuation. The current political system, which legitimates and is itself funded and sustained by these mechanisms, is

also culpable, as are the broader cultural practices, such as mass consumerism, that stem from such mechanisms.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RECENT STRUGGLES FOR GENDER EQUALITY

As the definitions above suggest, considerable progress has been made in recent years to break down the gender binary and build a more representative vocabulary around gender. Of course, there is still a long way to go. Nevertheless, it is useful to review some of the events, movements, and theories that have led us to where we are today.

The “Waves of Feminism”

The history of the struggle for gender equality stretches for several millennia, at very least. It would certainly be impossible to relay all of it here. However, there are

a number of significant movements and periods of thought and action from the recent past that have made an important contribution to shaping what gender means today. Among these are what have been termed “waves of feminism.” Scholars typically identify three such “waves”—although some have also suggested that we are currently moving into a distinct fourth wave. It should be noted that the waves occurred in many—but not all—areas of the world, and that their specifics varied substantially across different geographic locations, populations, etc.

The so-called first wave of feminism was perhaps at its height in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Strong social movements formed that focused primarily on gaining political rights for women, and many women gained the right to vote and own property during this period. However, the rights obtained were rarely universal,



and often excluded poor women and women of color. For example, the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which was ratified in 1920, technically prohibited any citizen from being denied the right to vote due to their sex; however, many poor women and women of color continued to be effectively barred from voting due to violence, intimidation, and policies like literacy tests and poll taxes, designed to disenfranchise the poor and the non-white.⁵

While the struggle for full political rights continued, by the middle of the twentieth century women also began to organize around workplace, family, and reproductive rights. Some of their specific demands included equal pay for equal work, access to birth control and abortion, access to childcare, and stronger protections against violence and sexual assault in both the workplace and the home. As during the first wave, this second wave of feminism gave rise to strong social movements, peaking in the period between the 1960s and 1980s, and gaining power through linkages to many of the other social movements of the era—including the Anti Vietnam War Movement.

In addition to the “equal opportunity” strand, there was also a growth in socialist and Marxist feminism during the

Wages for Housework Campaign

The Wages for Housework Campaign first formed in Italy in the early 1970s, and was led by Selma James and the International Feminist Collective. Soon after, Silvia Federici, one of the founding members of the Collective, brought the campaign to the United States, establishing a Wages for Housework Committee in Brooklyn, New York. As the name implies, the primary goal of the campaign was to fight for paid compensation for domestic work. However, its broader purpose was to draw attention to the critical role women’s unpaid labor plays in reproducing capitalism. An original pamphlet for the Brooklyn branch of the Wages for Housework Committee can be found [here](#).

second wave, which emphasized the intersection between class and gender, as well as the role women played in the reproduction of capitalism through their performance of care work and other types of unpaid labor central to social reproduction. One of the movement’s taglines was “the personal is political,” which suggested that many issues that had previously been perceived as “personal”—like domestic violence and street harassment—actually stem from systemic oppression, and thus are political in nature. There was also a focus on women-only spaces and organizations during this time, as well as an offshoot known as “ecofeminism” which claimed that amplifying the “feminine instinct” was necessary for healing the rift between nature and human societies.

Although sometimes criticized as being a middle class white women’s movement, there was also a strong radical Black feminist movement in the United States during the second wave, as well as links between the women’s movement and the Civil Rights Movement and Chicano Rights Movement.⁶ Similarly, while the term “second wave feminism” is often associated with the movements and scholarship that were happening in the United States, struggles for similar rights soon developed around the world, making the “wave” global.

The third wave of feminism overlapped to some degree with the tail end of the second, and was perhaps at its height in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Unlike the first two waves it did not focus primarily on gaining greater legal rights, economic power, or equal opportunity for women, and did not inspire strong social movements. Instead, much of this wave occurred in the academic sphere, where it made important contributions to our understanding of gender as a social construct, in the process helping break down the gender binary. Drawing on postcolonial and postmodern thought, the third wave worked to deconstruct received notions of sexuality and heteronormativity.⁷ While this wave embraced **intersectionality** (see “Where

Gender Intersects” below), it shunned the communal identity of the second wave, which may account (in part) for the widely perceived decline in overt political activism during this phase.

Although many scholars maintain that we are still in the third wave of feminism—or in some type of lull after the third wave—recent developments have led many to suggest that we are actually entering a distinct fourth wave. The confusion may arise, in part, from the fact that many of the characteristics of the fourth wave are syntheses of elements of the second and third waves; namely, **the fourth wave seems to combine the action-oriented agenda, class analysis, and (sometimes) the communal identity of the second wave with the intersectionality and non-binary gender understandings of the third.**⁸

Relatedly, many academic departments studying such issues have recently changed their names from “women’s studies” to “gender and sexuality studies.” The notional fourth wave is also strongly associated with the use of the internet in activism, and particularly social media platforms like Tumblr. Regardless of what it is called and whether it constitutes another wave, the current moment is important because

the analysis it provides inherently points towards systemic change, and the tools it employs (including the internet) suggest that its message could spread far, and quickly.

Queer and Trans Rights*

Running in parallel to the above movements, which focused primarily on the system's oppression against women (with the exception of the fourth wave), have been the struggles of trans* people against gender oppression. Most of the organized movements for trans* rights were part of broader LGBTQ movements, which focused on combating oppression against all queer people. ("Queer" is an umbrella term which refers to all people who are not heterosexual or cisgender.) Such organizing was difficult due to laws in many countries that criminalized homosexuality and any person who was not (or was not perceived to be) cisgender; yet despite the risk, queer rights groups (which often used the term "homophile" until the mid twentieth century) existed in a number of European nations and the United States by the mid twentieth century.

A strong LGBTQ movement was able to form in the social movement-friendly environment of 1960s America. In 1969, the famous Stonewall uprising occurred

in lower Manhattan after police raided the Stonewall Inn, a bar frequented by trans* people. Though such raids were not uncommon, in this instance the local LGBTQ community responded with a series of demonstrations, during which violence broke out between the police and protesters. The events raised awareness about the daily violence and injustices experienced by queer people, and sparked the Gay Liberation Movement in the United States, which lasted into the 1980s, and inspired similar movements in other countries.

Through these organizing efforts, many of the laws that criminalized homosexuality were repealed, including sodomy laws across the United States, the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, and, through a 2015 U.S. Supreme Court ruling, state bans on same-sex marriage. Still, there is a long way to go, particularly in the realm of rights for trans* people. Sex is still typically assigned at birth, and though in some countries it is possible to have one's legal sex changed later in life, the process is often very difficult. Furthermore, only a very few countries (including at present Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Germany, Australia, and New Zealand) offer a legal third gender category for those who identify outside of the gender

binary. This lack of legal representation makes protecting trans* people from serious threats—like workplace discrimination and hate crimes—much more difficult.

Men and Toxic Masculinity

Cisgender men have also participated in the struggle against gender oppression as allies, and many have understood that a patriarchal, sexist system also ultimately harms them at the same time it harms the gendered other. The term “toxic masculinity” refers to certain characteristics of the socially-constructed masculine gender role that are harmful both to the individual who is expected to perform them, as well as to society as a whole. These characteristics include proclivities towards violence, sexual aggression, control, and the suppression of emotion. As traditional gender roles and the gender binary continue to be challenged and interrogated in the fourth wave, discussions on the harmfulness of toxic masculinity have increased. This is not to say, of course, that masculinity more generally is being attacked (as some inevitably argue); indeed, as gender roles become less rigidly enforced by society, more women and trans* people are able to openly embrace masculinity.



GENDER OPPRESSION IN THE CURRENT SYSTEM

As previously mentioned, one significant characteristic of the current system is that it oppresses anyone who is not perceived to be male and cisgender. The following section will elaborate on some of the specific ways that women and trans* people experience oppression within the current system. While these are broad categories and not exhaustive, they represent many of the arenas in which gender oppression exists and must be overcome.

Where Gender Intersects

Drawing on the critiques advanced in the 1960s and 70s by feminists of color, the term intersectionality was coined by prominent critical race theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in her 1989 essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” to describe the particular form of discrimination faced by Black women. She writes:

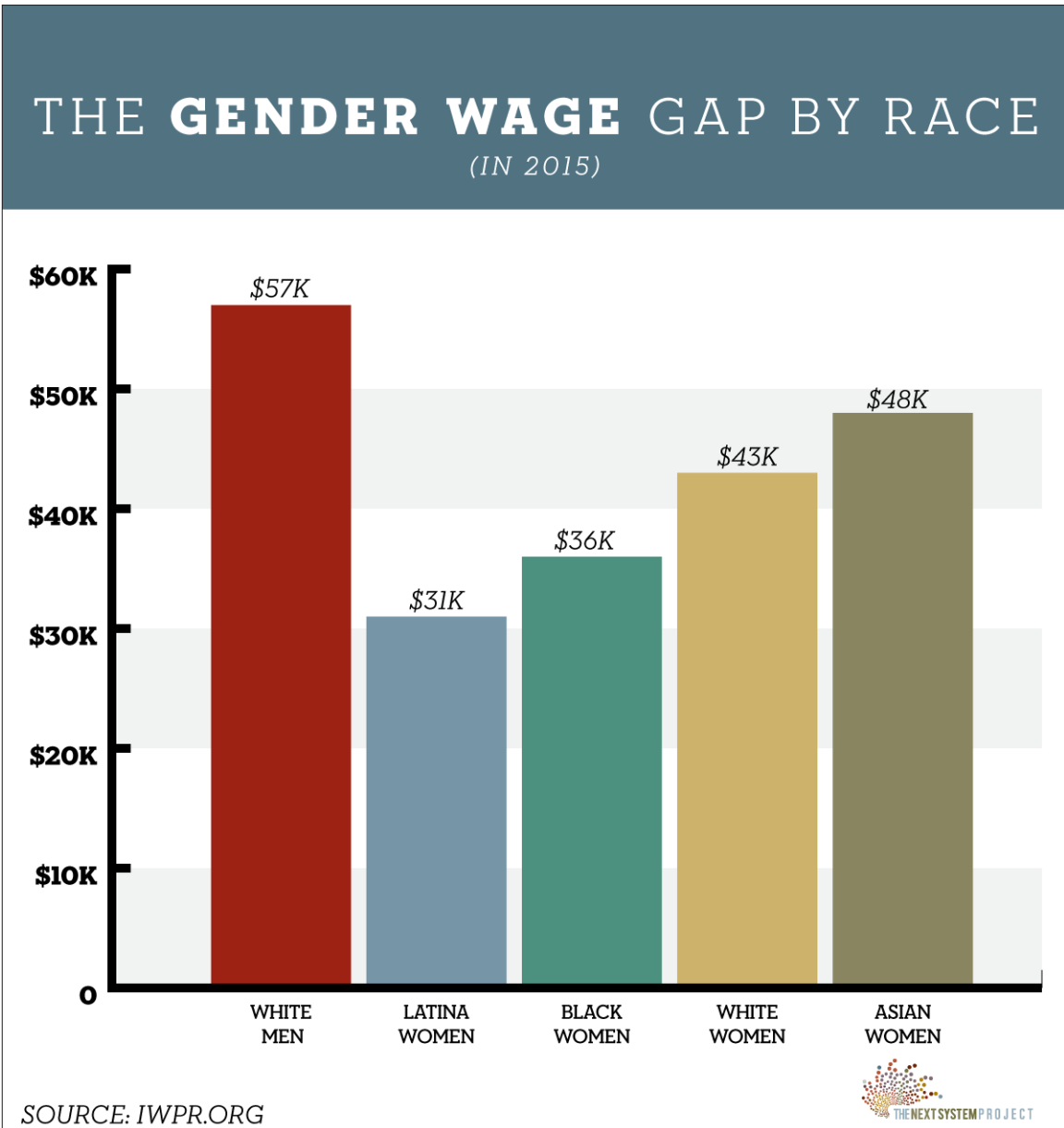
To bring this back to a non-metaphorical level, I am suggesting that Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men. Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women’s experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.⁹

From this starting point, intersectionality has been used to understand many other places where different types of oppression (sexism, racism, homophobia,

xenophobia, ableism, ageism, etc.) overlap to create a new type of oppression. For the purpose of this paper, attention will be focused on the places where sexism (prejudice or discrimination based on one’s sex or gender, typically experienced by women and trans* people) intersects with other forms of oppression.

As Crenshaw and many others have noted, women and trans* people of color experience a very particular type of oppression in the current system. For example, the oft-quoted statistic that in 2013 women workers in the United States earned an average of 78 percent of the earnings of men obscures the fact that many women of color earned far less. Indeed, when compared to the earnings of white, non-Hispanic men, the wage gap for women of color was significantly higher, and Black women earned only 65 cents—and Hispanic or Latino women only 54 cents—for every dollar earned by a white, non-Hispanic man.¹⁰

Women and trans* people of color are also significantly more likely to experience violence. According to Domestic Abuse Intervention Services (DAIS) statistics on domestic violence, African American women are three times more likely to be murdered by a current or former intimate partner, and Hispanic women are



more likely than non-Hispanic women to be raped by a current or former intimate partner.¹¹ Unfortunately, such statistics are only examples of a much larger pattern of systemic oppression.

Women and trans* people who do not identify as heterosexual also experience

a particular form of oppression within the current system. While non-heterosexual men also experience discrimination, we can apply Crenshaw’s lens of intersectionality to see that only sometimes is the discrimination that non-heterosexual women and trans* people face similar. At other times, the type of discrimination the latter

groups face is unique, because it is layered with misogyny and/or transphobia.

Similarly, women and trans* people with disabilities and older women and trans* people can face unique forms of discrimination due to the combined impact of ableism or ageism and misogyny and/or transphobia. This is certainly notable in the workforce, where each of these forms of discrimination (individually) has been well documented.¹² Some studies have also confirmed the existence of “double discrimination” in the workplace, such as the tendency of the wage gap (between women and men) to be larger between older workers than younger workers.¹³ This is a clearly yet another example of intersectionality at play in the workforce.

It is important to note that intersectionality has come to denote more than just “double discrimination,” or the unique effect caused by two forms of discrimination overlapping; it also encompasses the notion of more than two layers of discrimination coming together at once. For example, there is also a unique form of discrimination experienced by older Black women, and by non-heterosexual trans* people of color. And there are as many forms of discrimination as there are combinations of all the individual forms of discrimination.

Since there are so many different forms of discrimination that can affect women and trans* people, it would be difficult to list all of them here. However, attention will be called to one more specific form, since it is so prevalent in the current system: the way that misogyny and/or transphobia is experienced by the poor and working class. Statistics have shown year after year that women are still more likely than men to live in poverty in the United States (16% to 13% in 2014).¹⁴

Trans* people are nearly four times more likely than the general population to have a household income under \$10,000 per year.¹⁵ The full effects of living under or near the poverty line hardly need rehearsing, but among them are decreased nutrition, poorer overall health, substandard housing or homelessness, and lower educational levels.

In sum, **intersectionality means that different women and trans* people experience gender oppression differently, because of the interconnections between gender and other identities** (race, class, sexual orientation, etc.). This also means that, in practice, organizing against gender oppression must include organizing against the other forms of oppression that women and trans* people face, and that the organizing itself must be anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-homophobic, etc.

Gender and Work

Women, and particularly women of color, have long been part of the paid workforce in the United States. However, the percentage of women in the workforce has increased substantially in the last half-century, following new legislation (such as the Civil Rights Act of 1965 and the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission), and the advent of a new, neoliberal era that caused wage stagnation and forced more working- and middle-class women into the workforce.¹⁶ Women now constitute around forty-seven percent of the labor force.¹⁷ Also notable during this period has been the growth of women employed in typically higher-paid occupations, including as dentists, veterinarians, physicians, and surgeons. Still, men remain better paid in these and nearly every other occupation, with little being done to close the gender pay gap mentioned in the previous section, which exists not only on a national but also on a global scale.¹⁸

Similarly, a growth of women in top-paying occupations has not meant a change in the overall gendered nature of work. Women continue to find it difficult to move up the pay ladder in their organizations and corporations, with only 14.2% of the top five leadership positions in the

S&P 500 currently held by women.¹⁹ The most common occupation for women today also remains the typically lower-paid secretary and/or administrative assistant, which is the same as it was in 1970. This is discouraging, and offers only the merest glimpse into the deeply gendered nature of many occupations. Perhaps the most obvious and significant of these is paid care work, which includes paid childcare and eldercare workers, teachers, nurses, and paid domestic workers, among others, and which tends to be disproportionately performed by women, and often for lower wages and with more precarity than work in other, male-dominated sectors.

Meanwhile, **the vast majority of care work remains unpaid, and women continue disproportionately to perform this work as well—spending anywhere from two to ten times more time on unpaid care work than men.**²⁰ Unpaid care work includes caring for children, the elderly, and/or people with disabilities (without compensation), as well as doing unpaid domestic work (cooking, cleaning, laundry, etc.). In order to fully understand the particular burden that this type of work places on women today, it is important to remember the increased number of women doing paid work, as well as the fact that in many countries, including the United States, the

number of women raising children on their own has also increased.²¹ Similarly, the growing elderly population in many parts of the world has increased—and with it the need for elder care.²²

This unpaid work that occurs within the domestic—or “private”—sphere is sometimes referred to as “reproductive labor,” because it is necessary in order for the system to be reproduced. In addition, women also physically reproduce the next generation of the species through childbearing. Though obviously critical to the reproduction of the system in the most fundamental sense, most countries grant mothers only a relatively short period of paid maternity leave after they have given birth, and the United States gives none at all.²³ Access to childcare is also often unavailable or restricted, in part because it is typically left to the capitalist marketplace, without any social controls on its cost. Furthermore, many countries further multiply the burdens of care work by also restricting women’s access to reproductive health care—particularly to contraception and abortion—which inhibits women’s ability to control when or how often they have children. What all of these policies have in common is that they restrict women’s agency and power in the system; or, put another way, such policies *aid oppression*.

A final subdivision of women’s unpaid work is the work of emotions, which scholars have broken down into two related categories: “emotional labor” and “emotion work.” “Emotional labor” refers to the component of many jobs that requires the employee to either convey a particular emotion (such as a flight attendant being asked to behave cheerfully), or to produce a particular emotion in others (such as a server who is asked to make customers feel happy).²⁴ While many jobs require this type of labor, the jobs that require more of it tend to be done primarily by women. Similarly, “emotion work”—which refers to the same type of work when it is performed in the “private” sphere—is also largely done by women, particularly within families and romantic relationships.

To this point, this section has focused largely on the discrimination and oppression of women. However, it is important to point out once again the discrimination that trans* people face at work due to their gender. According to the Human Rights Campaign, one in five transgender people report experiencing some kind of workplace discrimination, such as being denied a promotion, being harassed, or even being fired.²⁵ With regards to unpaid labor, it can be assumed that the characterization of reproductive

labor as “feminine” work negatively impacts any person who identifies as, or is perceived to be, feminine, in the same way that it negative impacts people who identify as women.

Space, Safety, and Security

There are also many ways in which the physical spaces in which we live and interact contribute to gender oppression in the current system. As mentioned above, much reproductive labor—which is disproportionately performed by women—occurs within the domestic sphere. Traditionally, this sphere is considered to be “private” because it relates to the family. However, feminist scholars have convincingly argued for decades that the family is a political institution that should be subject to the principles of justice. In her entry for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on “Feminist Perspectives on Reproduction and the Family,” Professor Debra Satz summarizes the three main arguments scholars and activists have used as follows:

1. Families are not “natural” orderings, but social institutions backed up by laws. For example, marriage is a social institution. Therefore, the state cannot choose not to intervene in families: the only question is how it should intervene and on what basis.
2. The state has a critical interest in the development of future citizens.
3. The division of labor in traditional families constrains women’s opportunities and freedoms in the wider society.²⁶

In terms of concrete space, the family and domestic sphere has been associated with the home, or the physical place in which families reside. Under the current system, which privileges a particular familial form—namely, the nuclear family—this has meant the proliferation of single-family homes. As structures, single-family homes—whether apartments or houses, rented or owned—have helped to reinforce the conception of the family as private, and largely unregulated by the state. While this has obvious negative effects on the visibility of domestic abuse, it also obscures other oppressive elements of the family, including the unequal distribution of domestic work and emotion work.

Unfortunately, it is not only through the structure of the home that space is used to uphold the patriarchal nature of the current system. Indeed, modern cities and towns are also organized in ways that reinforce gender oppression. In the United States, housing and transportation represent the two largest financial costs for most households.²⁷ This means

that they are particularly burdensome for poorer households that have less disposable income, and thus for women and trans* people who tend to be poorer. In addition, women who are working the so-called “double shift” of managing a paid job and performing most (or all) of a household’s care work and domestic chores are disproportionately effected by the additional time and transportation costs associated with traveling to and from care facilities (for child, disability, and elder care), and stores where household goods can be purchased.

However, this is not to suggest that women are more mobile than men overall. Indeed, as the authors of the book *Cities and Gender* note in their chapter on “Migration, movement and mobility,” men in the Global North tend to travel longer distances and spend more time traveling on a daily basis.²⁸ Yet in many ways this fact also points to gender inequality. First, the time men spend traveling is less likely to overlap with reproductive labor in the way that some of women’s daily travel (mentioned above) does. In addition, since men tend to be less responsible for care work in general, they are able to spend more time traveling to jobs that pay more. Of course, cohabiting partners with children may also collectively decide that the partner with a higher paying

Violence in the Home

Since the home is perceived as the “private” domain of the family, it is unfortunately often the site of violence against children, as well as violence against intimate partners. This latter type of violence—which includes physical, sexual, emotional, economic, and psychological abuse and is also known as “domestic violence”—is disturbingly common. While men are also often victims of it, women are most likely to experience it. Current data reveals that in the United States, 1 in 3 women will experience some form of physical violence from an intimate partner during their lifetime, and 1 in 5 will experience severe physical violence. The statistics are much the same worldwide, when sexual violence by a non-partner is also accounted for.

For more information on intimate partner violence in the United States, see: ncadv.org. For more on the global dimensions of the problem, see who.int.

job should spend more time commuting. But, as explained earlier, such a partner is more likely to be a man due to the gender wage gap.

In the Global South, the realities of urban space also reflect gender oppression, although sometimes in slightly different ways. Women are similarly forced to travel in order to perform reproductive labor, although the overall distance involved may be less. For example, the UN estimates that in Africa women do 90% of the work of gathering water and

wood for household use and food preparation.²⁹ Moreover, at the same time that women are forced to travel in order to perform reproductive labor, their mobility is also being restricted in many parts of the world due to sexist beliefs about driving abilities—an extreme example being the oft-cited effective *de facto* ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia. (It is a common misconception that women in Saudi Arabia are prevented from driving either under religious or state laws. While this is not the case, most women still do not drive due to pressure from their family and/or communities.)

Throughout the world, women’s movement is further restricted by the persistent violence they face in public spaces, which ranges from unsolicited comments and bodily contact to rape and femicide.³⁰ This violence can make even the most basic movements from place to place—such as running out to the grocery store—an anxiety-inducing activity for women, particularly in countries where the law does not criminalize such violence. The constant threat of violence in public spaces also impacts trans* people throughout the world, including in the United States, where there has been growing awareness in recent years about the daily harassment, physical assaults, and murder of trans* people in public spaces.³¹

As might be expected, this type of violence is one of the many factors that lead women and trans* people to participate in long-distance movement in the form of migration. There are many different forms of migration—including temporary, permanent, legal, illegal, labor, and conflict-induced—and many different reasons why each type of migration occurs.³² Unfortunately, most of the literature on migration still focuses on men, and/or on family units, which can obscure the experiences of women and trans* people, who, in addition to having to deal with the same “macro” factors that may lead to the desire to migrate (such as the state of the national economy), also face unique “micro” factors, including the gender relations and hierarchies in their country of origin or particular family.³³

Migration due to climate change is becoming ever more common, and this too appears to disproportionately impact women. In particular, the widespread food insecurity that has emerged in recent years, driven by rising temperatures and erratic weather patterns, has placed significant strain on women in the Global South, who often rely on agriculture both for their personal nutritional needs and as their only source of income. When harvests fail, many women have no

choice but to migrate. In fact, the United Nations estimates that about two-thirds of the female labor force in developing countries—and ninety percent in Africa—is in agriculture, making present climate predictions especially frightening from a gender perspective.³⁴

Rights and Representation

One of the reasons that many women and trans* people choose or are forced to migrate is that their rights (and, consequently, their opportunities) are limited in the country in which they live. While there is, of course, a wide range in the severity of laws tied to gender oppression, nearly every country in the world continues to maintain some such laws on the books, including the United States.

One of the areas in which this is particularly evident is reproductive rights: the rights related to control over when and if people have children. These include the right to legal and accessible contraception, abortion, and obstetric and prenatal care. In many countries, all or some of these rights—contraception and abortion in particular—remain illegal. In addition, the exercise of these rights is inextricably tied to access to quality reproductive healthcare. Such care is often inaccessible due to its cost to the patient and/or a lack of funding for the care

itself. This is certainly true in the United States, where it is becoming increasingly difficult to access reproductive health-care due to the defunding of Planned Parenthood, restrictive state laws, and misinformation campaigns.³⁵

Undoubtedly contributing to the lack of women's and trans* people's rights worldwide is their lack of political participation and representation. In the United States, women constitute less than twenty percent of all members of Congress, with only 64 women of color having ever served in Congress. There has never been an openly trans* member of either the House or the Senate.³⁶ The number of women and trans* people elected to state and local office is also abysmally low. For example, only 24.6 percent of US state legislators are women.³⁷ Worldwide, the numbers are much the same, with only 22.8 percent of all national parliamentarians being women, as of June 2016.³⁸ And while these and other similar indicators have begun to change in a positive direction over the years, this change has been glacially slow.

Accurate and complete representation of women's work in most economic accounting is also more or less completely missing. Since a significant amount of the care work done by women is unpaid, it is

absent from most metrics—including the most important economic measurement of all in the present system, Gross Domestic Product (or GDP). Not only does this reinforce the narrative that care work is some type of “labor of love” rather than “real work,” it also suggests that unpaid care work is a less important endeavor, since metrics like GDP are touted as indicating the overall health of an economy. Thus you could have a crisis of care work—such as that which is currently being experienced in many developed nations due to increasing elder populations—that is not reflected in formal metrics, so long as people (most often women) step in to perform the additional work. These additional work burdens, along with the pain experienced by members of society who simply cannot afford the care they need and have no one to step in to provide it for them, remain outside the formal metrics of the economy.

Related to both legal rights and economic representation is the matter of the long history of denial of property rights to women. While the past century has, in most areas of the world, seen significant improvements in women’s ability to acquire and inherit property, the legacy of such laws and the continuation of gendered customs around property have meant that men continue to own more property. This

is particularly evident in the distribution of land ownership, which men continue to dominate even in countries where women do far more of the agricultural labor.³⁹

Unfortunately, politics and the economy are certainly not the only areas in which women and trans* people suffer from a lack of representation in the current system. Indeed, the problem is so pervasive that it would be nearly impossible to list all of the areas in which it is operative here. However, it is important to highlight the lack of representation women and trans* people have in the media, since this exclusion directly feeds into wider cultural trends of oppression. In 2010, a United Nations study on gender and the media that looked at over 100 countries found that only twenty-four percent of the people “heard or read about in print, radio and television news” are women.⁴⁰ The same study also found that forty-six percent of news stories in print, radio, and television uphold gender stereotypes.⁴¹ While there is less statistical data on the representation of trans* people in the media, it is clear that they are rarely visible in traditional media throughout the world, and that the gender stereotypes mentioned above that harm women and men are also harmful to them, since such stereotypes promote the binary gender construction.

The Effects of Imperialism

Even after the collapse of most of the colonial occupations of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, certain countries continue to exhibit patterns of domination over other nations, primarily through exertion of their economic and military power. This process, also known as imperialism, is another key feature of the current system. Its effects are far reaching, and often include long-term poverty, political and economic underdevelopment, and exposure to violence for those living in subjugated countries and regions. Such violence can sometimes come directly from military actions taken by imperialist nations trying to preserve their economic or political interests. A common example of this would be a powerful country backing a coup in a foreign nation to make sure a government favorable to its economic interests remains in or comes into power (examples include US and British support for the 1953 overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran, the US planned 1954 overthrow of Jacob Árbenz in Guatemala, and the US backed 1973 overthrow and assassination of Salvador Allende in Chile). However, it is more common that imperialist nations use their influence to persuade or intimidate states into protecting their interests.

Postcolonial Feminist Theory

Posing an important challenge to and critique of the echo chamber of white, Western-centric mainstream feminism, postcolonial feminists argue that women should not be viewed as a single group or monolithic identity. Instead, they emphasize the many other identities that women hold—and are often discriminated against on the basis of—including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class. They also centralize the history of colonialism, and the differences between women in colonizer and colonized (and formerly colonized) nations. Through focusing on the intersections between gender and other identities and the history of colonialism, postcolonial feminists have added some necessary depth and geographical breadth to feminist discussions.

Women and girls are uniquely impacted by imperialism. Since they are more likely to live in poverty, they are also more likely to suffer in poor or unstable economic conditions. In addition, they often experience state violence differently than men, and are more likely to experience certain types of violence, including sexual violence. For example, after the US helped to overthrow Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973, the new military regime of Augusto Pinochet persecuted opponents and perceived opponents, torturing tens of thousands. Many were targeted within the first few months of the regime as it attempted to consolidate power, and while sexual violence was used against both women and men during this time, many reports state that nearly all women prisoners experienced it.⁴²

Though perhaps more subtle, it is also important to consider the effects that imperialism (and globalization, more broadly) has on cultural norms and practices that influence women, girls, and trans* people—like the imposition of certain gender roles and the perpetuation of unequal social and economic outcomes along gender lines. Many historians, social scientists, and theorists have considered this effect, with some linking policies that support men’s dominance and women’s subordination to what they call “hegemonic masculinity.”⁴³ While the term may appear to be suggesting that there is a universal masculinity, it is instead proposing that there are practices that support a certain form of masculinity that is often employed to keep certain men dominant in a society.

For example, many countries have conscription policies that apply only to men (or only to cisgender, heterosexual men), which reinforces a dominant position for a certain type of masculinity (physically strong, aggressive, etc.).

As explored in the above section, gender oppression is an essential characteristic of the current system. From its organization of paid and unpaid work, to its design of physical space, allocation of legal rights and political representation, and imperialist nature, women and trans* people experience daily injustice. However, the struggle against this oppression continues, and the next section will consider some of the ways that people are currently working to lessen it through either restructuring the system, or working to construct a new one entirely.

WHERE ARE WE GOING? TRANSITIONAL STEPS AND VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

Given the scale and complexity of the issues outlined above, how might we conceive of—and take steps to begin transitioning to—a next system free from gender oppression? There have been many proposals and on-the-ground



experiments that offer elements of a new system, and some of these will be explored later in the section. However, few proposals detail what a new system that properly eliminates gender oppression might look like in its entirety. Although some argue that such “blueprints” of alternative systems are not useful, it is the contention of this paper that they are necessary—even if they remain somewhat underdetermined—in part because they help clarify where the individual steps that could make up a transitional program can and should lead.

The case of universal basic income—which is being increasingly widely debated in a number of contexts and venues, including by scholars and policy makers pursuing gender equality—nicely illustrates this point. Universal basic income, which is sometimes also called an “unconditional basic income” (U.B.I.), or “basic income guarantee” (B.I.G.), may be defined as “an income unconditionally granted to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement.”⁴⁴ In most cases, this is a governmental policy that only benefits citizens or residents of a particular country, although a few proposals are more expansive.⁴⁵ In the United States, the potential for a universal basic income has received significant and growing attention over the past few

years. Moreover, this interest has been advanced from a variety of political and ideological standpoints, causing some to praise it as a nonpartisan solution or one with potentially broad popular appeal.

Yet this very fact ought to give us pause, and reason to review carefully and critically the details of each universal basic income proposal. Right-wing libertarian proponents like Charles Murray argue for an income that would a) be less than a living wage (the suggestion being \$10,000 for everyone over 21 in 2011) and b) replace all other social welfare programs.⁴⁶ Many liberal and even left wing supporters also advocate for a limited income (versus one that would be sufficient to live on), but typically do not support cutting other social assistance programs (like Medicaid, Social Security, SNAP, etc.). Some left-wing proponents have argued for an entirely sufficient basic income that could, when implemented in conjunction with several other changes that will be discussed later in this paper, help the transition to a postwork society. (See, for instance, the discussion of the work of Kathi Weeks in section “Possibilities of a Postwork World” below.)

The obvious—though rarely explicit—reason for these wide differences in

substantive content of the various policy proposals is the difference in preferred endpoint of each camp. Simplistically put, the libertarian ideal system is one in which the “free market” is as unregulated as possible, and the government simply exists to maintain “law and order” (i.e. to enforce economic contracts). In contrast, many liberal and left-leaning supporters view a universal basic income as one of the many reforms that could lessen inequality and move the United States towards a Nordic-style social democracy. And, as previously mentioned, some of the more radical left-wing supporters see it as a stepping-stone to a postwork society and world.⁴⁷

The various ideological perspectives in support of a universal basic income in the United States also vary in their view of how a basic income would impact gender oppression. Social democratic basic income advocates often cite the policy’s potential benefits to those who perform unpaid care work. For example, in an op-ed for the *New York Times*, Judith Shulevitz wrote:

The U.B.I. would also edge us toward a more gender-equal world. The extra cash would make it easier for a dad to become the primary caregiver if he wanted to. A mom with a job could write checks for child care and keep her earnings, too.

Stay-at-home parents would have money in the bank, more clout in the family, and the respect that comes from undertaking an enterprise with measurable value. And we’d have established the principle that the work of love is not priceless at all, but worth paying for.⁴⁸

Postwork visionaries similarly consider the effect that a universal basic income could have on offsetting the gendered nature of unpaid care work, while also holding that its main benefit would be to lessen our dependence on waged work.⁴⁹ Libertarians do not generally discuss the policy’s impact on gender oppression, and so it can be assumed that addressing this is not one of their major goals in advocating the policy.⁵⁰

As the case of universal basic income demonstrates, visions for the far future do matter, not only because they influence which transitional policies and structures are chosen for implementation, but also because they impact the particular details of those policies and structures arrived at in a given proposal. With this general point in mind, the next section will consider proposals and on-the-ground experiments aimed at combating gender oppression with two distinct endpoints in mind: either a social democratic system, or a decentralized

system based on community-level organizing. The potential of each will be examined, as well as their flaws and limitations—both of which can be helpful in further developing criteria for a system design that would truly address and eliminate gender oppression.

Social Democracy

The first system “endpoint” that will be considered is social democracy, which Lane Kenworthy recently described as “market capitalism plus generous and employment-friendly social policy.”⁵¹ The first aspect of this model that should be emphasized is that a version of it already exists in the world (and has existed in even stronger forms in the recent past). This is widely acknowledged by proponents of the system, and the Nordic model that developed in the postwar period is often upheld as a near ideal. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons that the system is so popular: since its “final form” is clear, the types of laws and reforms that are needed to achieve the system are also clear. Thus social democracy is not seen as utopian, but as a highly realistic and achievable alternative.

Of course, the specific laws and reforms that exist in a social democratic system are not predetermined, since the term refers to an ideal type, and every real world

version is, and will be, different. This is certainly true of the Nordic countries, which, though widely considered all to be social democracies, each have different laws, governmental structures, etc.⁵² Still, all of the Scandinavian countries rank high in international comparisons of gender equality.⁵³ Thus their policies are often looked to both as examples for legislation, and as inspiration for similar legislation that could help other countries (including the United States) transition to a social democratic-type system.

Some of the specific laws and reforms related to gender oppression most often discussed are:

- Paid maternity, paternity, and parental leave
- Paid home care
- Universal child care (and, theoretically, universal elder care)
- Quotas for women in political offices
- Legislation for equal pay
- Access to reproductive healthcare (including free abortion, potentially through universal healthcare)
- An extended social security program that covers caregivers (or universal public pension plan)
- A universal basic income

There are a number of “real world” examples that illustrate what some of

the above look like in practice, especially in the Nordic countries, which were, unsurprisingly, some of the first to implement many of these reforms. While it is not always easy to compare maternity, paternity, and parental leave due to variations in the specific policies (some countries offer additional leave at a reduced percentage of pay, for example), it is clear from all rankings that the Nordic countries are consistently judged to be among the world's best in this regard. Finland, for example, ranks high for the amount of paid parental and home care leave available to mothers, while Norway has implemented father-specific leave that a recent study found contributed to a more equal division of work (both paid and unpaid) between parents.⁵⁴ In Sweden, "same sex" and adoptive parents are also eligible for parental leave benefits.⁵⁵

The Nordic nations have also passed a number of other laws and reforms that target gender inequality. In Sweden, years of promoting women's political representation has led to some noteworthy gains, including the fact that the top governmental agencies in 2015 were headed up by eighty-two women and ninety men—a significantly better ratio for appointees than in most other countries.⁵⁶ Denmark's pension plan has been ranked as one of (and sometimes the)

world's best, and with a strong public component, it can help to increase the standard of living for people who performed a significant amount of unpaid care work—but little paid work—earlier in life.⁵⁷ Finland has even launched a two-year universal basic income pilot that began in 2017 and will offer a monthly tax-free wage of 560 euros to 2,000 unemployed, working-age adults.⁵⁸

Many other countries have also followed the Nordic nations' lead with similar laws and reforms, even if they are not considered to be fully (or even nearly) "social democratic." The Canadian province of Quebec, for instance, has established a subsidized universal childcare program that is administered by elected boards comprised of unionized workers and parents.⁵⁹ In 2012, Uruguay passed new abortion laws that are similar to those found in much of Europe and the United States, with no legal restrictions for abortion in the first twelve weeks of gestation. Rwanda even now ranks alongside most of the Nordic countries on gender equality (and even outranks Denmark), according to the 2016 Global Gender Gap Index, and was ranked first for its ratio of women in parliament.⁶⁰

The Global Gender Gap Index is an example of how metrics can be useful

in improving gender equality. The Index looks at categories such as “Economic Participation and Opportunity,” “Educational Attainment,” “Health and Survival,” and “Political Empowerment.” While being able to compare countries on this basis is very useful, there are several feminist theorists who, with the endpoint of social democracy in mind, argue for adjusting our more prominent economic metrics (including GDP). These include proposals by Riane Eisler and the Center for Partnership Studies for Social Wealth Economic Indicators (SWEIs), which seek to increase the formal value of care work and a healthy environment, and eliminate any “value” granted to activities that cause harm to people or the planet.⁶¹

Although few others have created a full alternative metric, many have also discussed achieving gender equality through changing what is counted in the formal economy, and how much value is afforded to different elements. A good example of this is Mary Riley’s *Feminist Political Economy*, in which the foundational value is “human well-being,” to which “gender equality is central.”⁶² However, it is important to note that most of these models seek to alter what is valued in the formal economy, but not the structure of the formal economy itself. Capitalist markets and

Gender Mainstreaming in Vienna

Since the 1990s, the Austrian capital of Vienna has been involved in a gender equity strategy they term “gender mainstreaming,” which seeks to “contribute towards a gender-sensitive society where solidarity, opportunities, and responsibilities are shared by women and men in equal measure.” The strategy stresses both “small changes”—like changes to language and preparing statistical data by gender and age—and “big changes,” including redesigning public spaces to better serve women and girls. This includes adding brighter pathway lighting, pedestrian-friendly streets and intersections, and parks designed with girls in mind, since studies suggested that girls were using parks far less than boys. Many of these changes reflect the need to make public spaces safer so that they are desirable to, and more usable by, women and girls, who frequently experience harassment and other forms of violence in public spaces. For more on gender mainstreaming in Vienna, see *Gender Mainstreaming in Urban Planning and Urban Development*.

mechanisms—like the process of capital accumulation, the ascendancy of the profit motive, etc.—appear to still exist in such visions.

This is true of all visions that have a systemic endpoint of social democracy in mind, since social democracy is still a form of capitalism. This presents severe limitations not only on what has been accomplished in existing examples but also on how much we could ever expect such models to accomplish, including in terms of gender equality. The Nordic countries help to illustrate this point.

Despite implementing the laws and reforms under discussion—often many decades ago—they still have a long way to go. (Indeed, in some cases their overall performance has been eroded as social democratic accomplishments have been undone in the neoliberal era, with economic inequality in Sweden—which has grown at the fastest rate in the OECD in recent decades—a dramatic case in point). A clear example related to gender is the rate of violence against women in the region—the Nordic countries have recently ranked as having some of the highest rates in the Europe. While the comparative statistics may be skewed due to inconsistent reporting (women in the Nordic countries may now be more likely to report violence, for instance), the rates of violence within the countries are themselves disturbing. A 2014 study, for instance, found that the 52% of women respondents in Denmark, 47% in Finland, and 46% in Sweden reported having been physically or sexually abused since the age of 15.⁶³

All in all, **while social democratic countries have achieved real progress on gender equality in some areas, operating within what is still a capitalist system poses real limits to the realization of gender liberation.**

Decentralized Place-based Systems

While those who have set their sights on social democracy certainly have a point that for most nations it would represent an improvement on the status quo, others have argued that we can, and should, push much further. Noting that the mechanisms of capitalism—even when they are regulated—are themselves harmful, many have developed theories and on-the-ground experiments designed to supplant these mechanisms.

Most of these visions focus on developing alternative institutions and structures that are not capitalist in nature, but which operate alongside the current system. While these alternative structures are often at the local level and therefore relatively modest in scope and scale, proponents believe that—collectively, and over time—they could replace the current system. Practitioners and theorists associated with this group also often stress the democratic nature of this “bottom-up” approach, and its ability to work in many different circumstances. The worldwide “solidarity economy” movement is a preeminent example of this approach.

The solidarity economy has generated many institutions and structures that relate directly to reducing current

gender inequality, a few of which will be highlighted in what follows. The first is the emergence of time banks, which are community-based service exchanges in which members exchange time for services. Typically, credits are earned by providing a service for a certain length of time. For example, if a member provided one hour of childcare for another member, that member might earn one unit of credit, which could then be exchanged for an hour of any number of different services (gardening, a ride somewhere, etc.). Time banks help to provide compensation for unpaid care work in a way that the formal economy does not, and can also help to spread the burden of care work more equally across the community.⁶⁴

A particularly interesting example of this is the Japanese mutual aid network Fureai Kippu, which provides care for seniors throughout Japan via a form of time banking. Participants of all ages can earn credits by providing care, which can then be used either for care for themselves (now or in the future), or for senior relatives or family members, even if the person requiring care resides in a different community. The network exists outside of the formal Japanese healthcare system, and, to the extent that participants use vouchers rather

Rojava

A recent example of an attempt to establish a complete alternative system of gender equality within a region is Rojava (Western Kurdistan), the de facto autonomous region of northern Syria. Since declaring autonomy in 2013, Rojava has attempted to establish a system of democratic confederalism (inspired in part by the anarchist thinker Murray Bookchin), with a constitution grounded in principles of direct democracy, sustainability, and gender equality. In December 2014, an academic delegation visited Rojava and the public statement that they released upon their return paid homage to the accomplishments in terms of gender equality:

In Rojava, we believe, genuinely democratic structures have indeed been established. Not only is the system of government accountable to the people, but it springs out of new structures that make direct democracy possible: popular assemblies and democratic councils. Women participate on an equal footing with men at every level and also organize in autonomous councils, assemblies, and committees to address their specific concerns. The women we met embodied the empowerment, self-confidence, and pride recently gained by the women of Rojava. We saw banners and slogans that read: "The Rojavan revolution is a women's revolution." It really is.⁶⁷

While only time will reveal how much the region's aspirations for gender equality will develop, reports from Rojavan women seem to show overwhelming support that they do, indeed, feel empowered, and hopeful about the future.⁶⁸

than opting for monetary compensation, outside of the formal economy as well. There are even branches now in Los Angeles, Switzerland, and London.⁶⁵

Another non-capitalist way some communities have chosen to deal with unpaid child and elder care is through forming care cooperatives. In the United States, childcare cooperatives typically involve parents and guardians taking turns to watch each other's children. Many aim for an equal share of the work, and it seems that often no one is paid. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of data on these types of unpaid cooperatives, because they tend to be informal—since they are not technically legal in all states. There are also likely many elder care cooperatives of this sort existing outside the formal economy in the U.S. Although incorporated into the formal economy, there are also many worker-owned care cooperatives in the US, such as the Beyond Care Cooperative in Brooklyn, New York.

The practice of cohousing—which involves residents of homes that are near or adjacent to one another establishing communal spaces (such as a kitchen and dining area, laundry, and/or outdoor space), and collectively owning certain household items—has also emerged in many communities. Members of these communities often also share domestic chores, such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, and partake in consensus decision-making. According to the Cohousing Association of the United States, there are now more

than 160 cohousing communities in the U.S., which are located in urban, rural, and semi-rural locations, and are usually composed of a mixture of individuals, couples, and adults with children.⁶⁶ However, while an interesting model, most cohousing arrangements require members to purchase a home in the community, which makes them unattainable to many, if not most, people with lower incomes.

By definition, the solidarity economy is pluralistic in form and elements of it—like time banks, care cooperatives, and cohousing—can exist within a capitalist system. However, its supporters argue that if enough of those alternative institutions and structures are developed in concentration in a particular geographical area, that area may begin to operate under an entirely different system. In addition, they contend that such pockets of systemic alternatives could eventually link together to replace capitalism entirely.

This theory of change is particularly limited because it appears to suggest a very slow process of system change. With global crises like rapidly unfolding climate catastrophe or the likelihood of another major financial meltdown hovering in the very near future, the process seems not only too slow, but likely to either fail entirely or see its limited gains subsumed

by wider and more powerful forces and trends. This is not to say, however, that building alternatives at the local level and from the bottom up isn't important; such changes raise awareness of the problems with the current system and offer partial relief and the possibility of belief in a tangible alternative to many, including with regards to gender liberation. Still, if we want to achieve full gender equality within a reasonable time frame, we must consider the timeline for reaching a new system and the scalability of the transitional steps to that new system given looming challenges and crises in the present system.

Possibilities of a Postwork World

As mentioned previously, there are few complete visions of a post-capitalist society that address gender equity directly. A notable exception is feminist postwork theory. Like all postwork theorists, feminists writing in this area believe that we should target and dismantle the activity of work in order to dismantle the current system. However, such theorists consider unpaid work (particularly unpaid care work) to be just as in need of reform as paid work, and focus on the potential of a postwork world to value such work without commodifying it.

Perhaps the leading theorist of this type of postwork vision is Kathi Weeks, who

set out her proposal most notably in her 2011 book *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*.⁶⁹ In it, Weeks outlines a few of the transitional steps that she believes would move us towards such a society, including: the reduction of the workweek; a universal basic income that is at least equivalent to a living wage, in order to lessen dependence on waged work; and bold, “utopian” demands that advance the conversation about what type of world we desire to live in. She emphasizes that even the steps that address waged work could have an impact on unwaged work and gender equality. Reducing the workweek would allow more time for many men to do care work, for example, and providing a living-wage basic income would enable more types of family relationships and choices.

While the more-complete vision of the future that feminist postwork theorists present appears to have a great deal of potential for further development, the theories are fairly new, and few “real world” experiments towards achieving them have taken place. They are, nonetheless, noteworthy and should be kept in view by anyone looking to imagine a next system based on gender equality and a systematic end to gender oppression.



CONCLUSION

The oppression of women and trans* people has existed for millennia—certainly long before the existence of the current system, which is widely regarded as having its origins in the sixteenth century. Still, the system we live under has been built upon that longer patriarchal history, and has developed particular forms of oppression all its own, some of which have been discussed in this paper. **Gender oppression is so deeply embedded within the current system that if we truly want to overthrow it, we will need to replace the system itself.**

But what is it, exactly, that we would like to see instead? What would a world look like in which an oppressive narrative of a gender binary no longer exists? In which sexism is not lurking on every street corner, in every workplace and

public space, or in every home? In which gender oppression no longer is layered upon other forms of systemic oppression, institutionalized by laws, codified into the spatial organization of our communities, and cemented by cultural norms and the media? And in which women and trans* people no longer live under the constant threat of violence and even death?

Answering these questions in detail, and also building out at the level of theory the other components of a full-scale alternative system model—including all of its political, economic, and social structures—is necessary not only because it gives us a hopeful vision to aspire to and be guided by, but also because it will clarify the transitional steps, models, and policies we need to adopt in order to begin moving towards that system.

Social democratic reforms and non-capitalist, place-based strategies aimed at lessening gender inequality can provide partial examples of what some transitional steps could be, *if* they are oriented towards longer-term more thoroughgoing systemic change. However, social democratic and decentralized place-based system models in their entirety are not sufficient to achieve complete gender equality: the former keep in place and preserve capitalist economic structures (and thus capitalism’s inherent social inequality), while the second cannot realistically be scaled within a reasonable timeframe. Recent feminist postwork visions provide intriguing insights into what a more fully-fledged alternative system design might look like, but remain largely theoretical and require far greater elaboration, debate, and on-the-ground practical development.

What we now require is a far more wide-ranging, substantive, and focused discussion around how to achieve gender equality and what this requires in terms of systemic change and the construction of new political-economic institutions and culture. The terrain on which to conduct such a debate, explored in a very initial and preliminary fashion in this paper, is becoming clear. This debate should

include all of the gender-focused experiments and theories that currently exist—social-democratic, place-based, and postwork—and demands a serious endeavor of collaborative inquiry and exploration to develop, project, and extend far more complete alternative system models that consciously incorporate gender equality and are capable of instituting it both as an essential, incontestable political demand and as an enduring systemic outcome and value. This paper is therefore a call for precisely such a discussion and debate, which must inevitably be the work of many hands.

NOTES

- 1 A note on pronouns: “his”, “her”, and “their” are included as singular pronouns here, since they are perhaps the most commonly used. However, there are a number of other pronouns that some people who identify outside the traditional gender binary prefer, including the gender neutral “Ze” and “E.” For more see: <http://web.mit.edu/trans/GenderNeutralPronouns.pdf>.
- 2 Nash Jones, “Bridging The Gap – Trans*: What Does the Asterisk Mean and Why Is It Used?”, Q Center, August 8, 2013, accessed September 28, 2016. <http://www.pdxqcenter.org/bridging-the-gap-trans-what-does-the-asterisk-mean-and-why-is-it-used/>.
- 3 “Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Definitions,” Human Rights Campaign, accessed September 28, 2016. <http://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions>.

- 4 While many mainstream definitions of sexual orientation describe it as “inherent” or “immutable” (see, for example, see the Human Rights Campaign’s at <http://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions>), this is likely a reflection of our ridged legal systems, which favor simple definitions. However, as noted above, a person’s sexual orientation may change any number of times.
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ABOUT THE NEXT SYSTEM PROJECT

The Next System Project is an ambitious multi-year initiative aimed at thinking boldly about what is required to deal with the systemic challenges the United States faces now and in coming decades. Responding to real hunger for a new way forward, and building on innovative thinking and practical experience with new economic institutions and approaches being developed in communities across the country and around the world, the goal is to put the central idea of system change, and that there can be a “next system,” on the map. Working with a broad group of researchers, theorists, and activists, we seek to launch a national debate on the nature of “the next system” using the best research, understanding, and strategic thinking, on the one hand, and on-the-ground organizing and development experience, on the other, to refine and publicize comprehensive alternative political-economic system models that are different in fundamental ways from the failed systems of the past and capable of delivering superior social, economic, and ecological outcomes. By defining issues systemically, we believe we can begin to move the political conversation beyond current limits with the aim of catalyzing a substantive debate about the need for a radically different system and how we might go about its construction. Despite the scale of the difficulties, a cautious and paradoxical optimism is warranted. There are real alternatives. Arising from the unforgiving logic of dead ends, the steadily building array of promising new proposals and alternative institutions and experiments, together with an explosion of ideas and new activism, offer a powerful basis for hope.

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