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REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN'S LABOR AND SOCIAL ROLES IN CONTEMPORARY WORLD LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the representation of women's labor and social roles in contemporary world literature within the broader context of neoliberal global capitalism. Integrating qualitative comparative textual analysis with secondary data on female labor force participation (2000–2024) across 50 countries, the research situates literary narratives within measurable socio-economic trends. Quantitative findings reveal cyclical fluctuation, crisis-induced vulnerability, and significant cross-national inequality rather than sustained linear progress in women's workforce participation. However, statistical indicators alone fail to capture the lived, symbolic, and ideological dimensions of labor. Through a feminist materialist and intersectional framework, the study analyzes how contemporary literary texts depict paid work, unpaid care labor, precarity, and structural inequality. The findings demonstrate that literature reframes women's labor as a site of contested agency, invisibility, and systemic constraint, exposing tensions between economic incorporation and persistent gendered hierarchies. By bridging political economy and literary studies, the article advances an interdisciplinary model that positions world literature as a critical archive of neoliberal restructuring and gendered labor dynamics. Ultimately, the study argues that literary representation not only reflects but interrogates the structural contradictions shaping women's work in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: women's labor, world literature, feminist materialism, intersectionality, neoliberal capitalism, precarity, gender inequality, labor force participation

1 INTRODUCTION

The global restructuring of labor under neoliberal capitalism has fundamentally transformed the organization of work, social relations, and economic governance across the world. With the deregulation, privatization, and flexibilization of labor and liberalization of markets promoted by neoliberal policies, which have been in place since the end of the twentieth century, precarious employment and the geography of global capitalism, in turn, have intensified (Herod and Lambert, 2016; Robinson, 2016). These changes have disproportionately affected women who have seen their work being absorbed in informal, insecure and low paying sectors disproportionately. The so-called phenomenon of the feminization of labor also includes not only the increasing female involvement in paid labor, but also the diversification of precarious, flexible, and undervalued labor traditionally related to women (Akorsu, 2016; Zulfiqar and Shafique, 2022). In response to economic global pressures, women are often placed in jobs with features of instability, wage differentials and institutional inadequacies.

The feminization of labor should be understood as

a structural reorganization and not as a demographic shift. The restructuring enabled by neoliberalism has institutionalised temporary contracts, part time working, and informal labour arrangements, which in most cases are disproportionately burdensome to women (Duman, 2020). The existing gender wage disparities and occupational segregation reveal the idea that the higher the participation, the more unlikely it becomes to be equitable and empowering (Shah et al., 2023; McKenzie et al., 2023). The contingent and politically contingent character of labor participation of women is also depicted through the historical analyses. As an illustration, the conditions of World War II in the United States temporarily increased the participation of women in the labor force only to be cut afterwards (Rose, 2018), and the economic restructuring in postwar Japan reinforces divisions of labor along gender lines in an economy rapidly in the modern world (Brinton, 2023). The image portrays two rural women engaged in manual agricultural labor, symbolizing the physical intensity and gendered nature of informal work (thehindv, 2021). Their embodied effort reflects economic necessity, limited labor protections, and the often-unrecognized contribution of women to subsistence and local economies Figure 1.



Figure 1: Embodied Labor and Gendered Survival (thehindv, 2021)

The last statistical information (2000-2024) shows that there is a high cross-national difference in the rates of female participation in the labor force, which is both a positive aspect and a continued gap. Nevertheless, the social meanings that women work have are intricate and thus cannot be only quantified. Labor data document rates of participation, however, in most instances hide the unpaid reproductive labor,

emotional labor, and care labor that continue to take center stage in the lived experiences of women. Further, this type of data seldom enlightens the cultural discourses and symbolic constructions in which societies explain the economic roles of women. In this respect, literature provides a critical perspective with the help of which the material and ideological aspects of work may be considered simultaneously.

The modern world literature is an important location where the issue of the representation of labor of women, its contesting, and reworking is discussed in the global context. Literary texts can also be interpreted against a background of the systems of global capitalism, as Lazarus (2022) claims, and the way work and its portrayal are predetermined by transnational economic processes. On the same note, Deckard (2024) highlights that world-literary visions are predictive of social reproduction and ecological aspects of women work, which puts the spotlight on labor that helps to keep households and economies

alive. The literary accounts often show how migration service, manual labor, factory jobs, and professional jobs are not only economic processes but a place of identity formation, social restraint, as well as resistance. The works addressing the gender representation in literary traditions show that literature reproduces and criticizes the hegemonic models of gender roles (Lucas and Ordeniza, 2023; Sharma, 2023; Spacks, 2022). By the use of narrative voice, characterization, and symbolic imagery, texts indicate the conflicts between economic involvement and lifetime patriarchal demands (Figure 2).

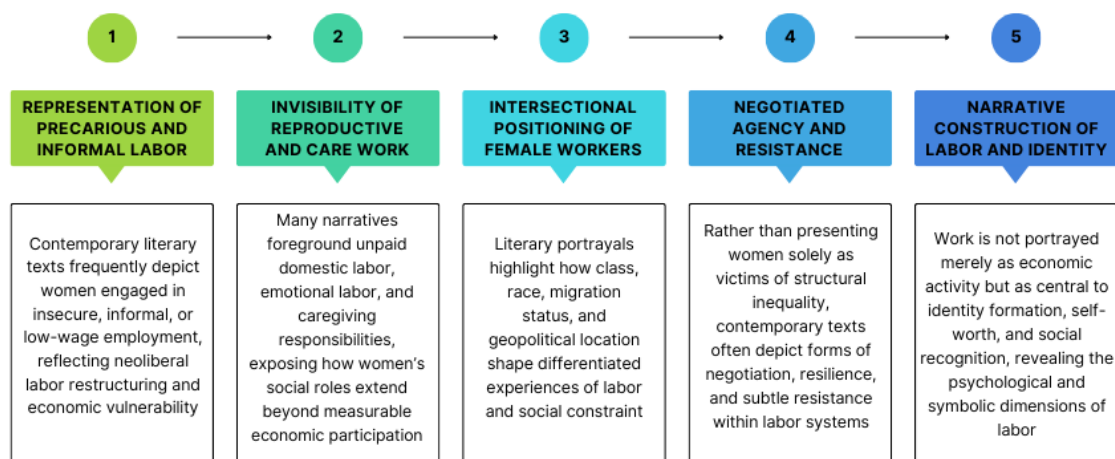


Figure 2: Women's Labor and Social Roles in Contemporary World Literature

This article explores how contemporary world literature represents women's labor within neoliberal capitalism, foregrounding precarity, unpaid care work, intersectional inequality, and negotiated agency. It argues that literary narratives critically expose the structural contradictions shaping women's economic participation and social identity.

Although there is an increasing interest in gender inequality and precarious labor regimes across all disciplines (Zulfiqar and Shafique, 2022; Gordon, 2019), there remains a major gap between socio-economic research on labor and literary research on representation. Scholarly work on inequality in the workplace and gender pay gaps tends either to be economic or sociological (Shah et al., 2023; McKenzie et al., 2023), and the literature is often based on thematic or psychological aspects without placing the stories in the context of how global capitalism is being restructured. Despite the emergence of world-literary approaches to the issue of work (Lazarus, 2022; Sandwith, 2022), comparative studies have not established a systematic examination of the problem, which strictly focuses on the work of women and various geopolitical regions. Moreover, the interplay between gender and class, race, and migration status

as an intersectional dimension is a phenomenon that is not well pursued in comparative literary methods.

To deal with such gaps, it is necessary to propose an analytical approach that will help to bridge the field of political economy and the interpretation of literary work. With the incorporation of feminist materialist view of labor and intersectional analysis, it can now be analyzed how the modern world literature redevelops the labor of women as a place of structural exploitation, social constraint, and negotiated agency. The literary works shed light on the contradictions to the neoliberal discourses of empowerment in the sense that, the high turnout of the working population still does not eliminate inequality or even escalate precarity. This way, the current stories indicate the discord between economic visibility and further marginalization whereby feminine labor is still the key to the operation of global capitalism and the creative redefinition of social positions.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the representation of women's labor in contemporary world literature within the

framework of neoliberal global capitalism

2. To examine how women's social roles are constructed through intersectional dimensions of gender, class, race, and migration in selected literary texts
3. To compare literary representations of women's labor with empirical trends in female labor force participation (2000–2024)

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design to investigate representations of women's labor and social roles in contemporary world literature. The study is interpretive and text-based, which concentrates on the way that literary texts produce, mediate, and challenge gendered work in neoliberal forms of global capitalism. Although its main focus is literary analysis, it has included secondary quantitative data on female workforce participation (2000–2024) as the way to introduce socio-economic background and make the analysis more grounded. The statistical integration of data does not put the study in the field of empirical modeling, but it provides the literary representation in the context of quantifiable world labor tendencies.

2.2 Research Method

Qualitative comparative textual analysis is the fundamental approach in this study. This approach includes close reading and interpretation of selected modern works of literature in a systematic manner to determine how the construction of women labor is narrated. Specifically, the analysis is on the representations of paid work, unpaid reproductive work, care work, precarious work, and informal economic activity. Focalization, characterization, dialogue and symbolic imagery are also considered as well as narrative voice influence the meaning of labor in texts. Instead of considering labor as a background story, the analysis considers the structural aspects of labor in plot development, character identity development, and social positioning.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

2.3.1 Feminist Materialist Approach

The research is based mostly on a feminist materialist approach, which imagines labor to be a critical location of gendered power dynamics of capitalist political economy. The viewpoint makes it possible to analyze the literary texts in terms of the gendered division of labor, invisibility of reproductive work, and commodification of the

female body and female labor force. Feminist materialist approach does not regard domestic labor, emotional work and care work as peripheral activities, but rather as being central in the economic systems. In this light, literary representations are discussed as the cultural reactions to the structural labor inequalities, precarious employment regimes, and neoliberal restructuring.

2.3.2 Intersectional Approach

The analysis has considered the intersectional framework, which focuses on gender interplay with the other factors of the class, race, the status of migration, and geopolitical location, to prevent the homogenization of women. Such a method enables the analysis to measure disparate vulnerability and privilege in manifestations of work. As an example, migrant domestic workers, the working and professional women can be placed differently in the narrative hierarchies. Intersectionality therefore enhances the focused analysis because it anticipates the layer of inequality instead of taking women as a unit.

2.4 Data Sources and Sampling

Secondary data are drawn from a 50-country dataset on female labor force participation covering the period 2000–2024. The data were obtained from the International Labour Organization's ILOSTAT database (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024), which provides harmonized and internationally comparable labor statistics. This dataset offers macro-level indicators of women's workforce participation and is used exclusively for contextual analysis.

2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The analytical process is done in four steps. The first step is close reading, which is done to determine significant passages that reflect labor of women, their household duties, the relationship at the workplace, and economic limitations. Second, repetitive motifs are grouped based on thematic coding, which will include invisibility of labor, precarity, commodification, social reproduction, and resistance. Third, comparative analysis is carried out in order to determine the structural similarities and contextual dissimilarities in texts of various regions. Lastly, the findings are discussed in the light of feminist materialist and intersectional approaches and placed in the context of the secondary labor participation data to address the contradictions between empirical workforce patterns and the literary accounts of inequality.

2.6 Validity and Limitations

The analytical rigor is achieved with the help of systematic thematic categorization, theoretical coherence, and cross-textual comparison. The quantitative labor data integration factors contribute to the contextual validity without affecting the qualitative research. But the study is confined to a few prose fictions works and the data about labor force participation, which are not exhaustive to encompass unpaid labor care and informal labor markets. Nevertheless, in spite of these shortcomings, the methodological framework offers a logical and theoretically informed strategy of looking at the ways in which contemporary world literature embodies the labors of women in the world structures of capitalism.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Temporal Trends in Female Labor Force Participation (2000–2024)

The 50-country data analysis reveals that the participation of the female labor force does not increase in a straight line. Average participation grew slowly as indicated in Table 3.1 with 53.88% in 2000 to a high of 55.48 in 2010. Since 2010, the trend fell with a moderate value of 53.28% in 2020, and then partially recovered to 54.00% in 2024 (Figure 3).

Table 3.1: Average Female Labor Force Participation (Selected Years)

Year	Average Participation (%)
2000	53.88
2005	54.51
2010	55.48
2015	54.48
2020	53.28
2024	54

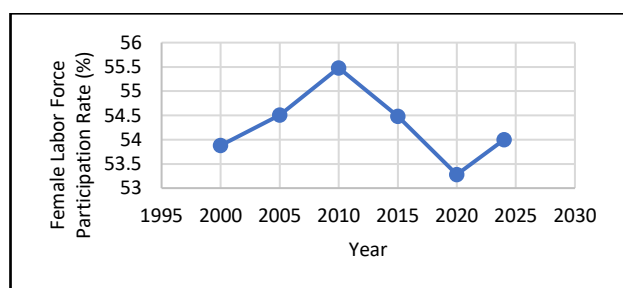


Figure 3: Average Female Labor Force Participation (2000–2024)

The graph illustrates the fluctuation of average female labor force participation across selected countries between 2000 and 2024. It highlights moderate growth until 2010, followed by decline and partial recovery, reflecting structural instability and

gendered labor vulnerability under global economic shifts.

3.2 Cross-National Variations in Participation (2024)

There are large discrepancies when the countries are compared. As exhibited in Table 3.2, it was found that the highest labor force participation rates among women were in the Global South countries where the highest rate was recorded at 79.86 percent in Burundi (Figure 4).

Table 3.2: Top 5 Countries by Female Labor Force Participation (2024)

Country	Participation (%)
Burundi	79.86
Benin	74.32
Cambodia	73.96
Angola	73.14
Bolivia	72.46

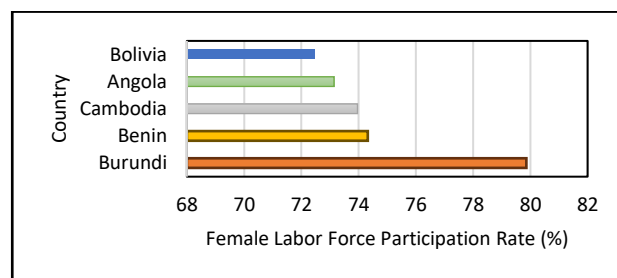


Figure 4: Cross-National Comparison of Female Labor Force Participation in Selected Countries (2024)

The figure compares female labor force participation rates across selected countries in 2024. It highlights significant cross-national variation, with Burundi showing the highest participation. The comparison underscores structural differences in women’s economic engagement across diverse global contexts.

Table 3.3 records the least participation rates in 2024, which brings out the harsh gender disparities in some situations. The high inequality between Burundi (79.86) and Afghanistan (5.10) highlights the asymmetrical distribution of the working environment of women in the global capitalism (Figure 5).

Table 3.3: Bottom 5 Countries by Female Labor Force Participation (2024)

Country	Participation (%)
Afghanistan	5.10
Algeria	13.99
Arab World (aggregate)	18.08
Bosnia and Herzegovina	39.44
Burkina Faso	41.02

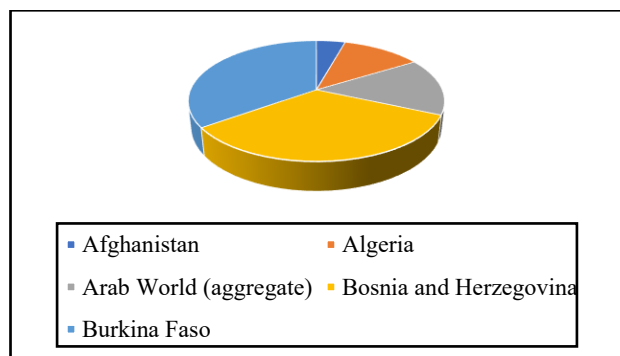


Figure 5: Distribution of Female Labor Force Participation Among Selected Low-Participation Countries (2024)

The pie chart illustrates the proportional distribution of female labor force participation among selected countries with comparatively lower participation rates in 2024. It highlights significant disparities, emphasizing structural, cultural, and socio-economic factors shaping women's limited workforce integration.

3.3 Crisis Impact and Structural Volatility

The dataset indicates that there was a significant decrease in the participation in the 2020 disruption period around the globe. According to Table 3.4, the average rate of participation dropped to 53.28 in 2020 compared to 54.61 in 2019, but this decreased by half only in 2021.

Table 3.4: Average Participation Before and During Crisis Period

Year	Average Participation (%)
2019	54.61
2020	53.28
2021	53.86

3.4 Participation Versus Structural Empowerment

The tables collectively demonstrate three key findings:

1. Female labor participation increased moderately between 2000 and 2010 but did not sustain long-term growth.
2. Cross-national disparities remain substantial.
3. Participation rates fluctuate significantly during global crises.

The large rate of participation may not be an indication that there are better labor conditions. In some of the high participation countries, women work in the informal sector, agricultural sector or subsistence sector. Low attendance, on the other hand, could mean the deeply rooted gender expectations that limit the rights of women to employment.

Accordingly, the quantitative information shows that the structure is not stable and fair, which forms the socio-economic basis of interpreting literary manifestations of precarity, invisibility, and negotiated agency. Although this dataset captures the economic participation aspect, it fails to capture the unpaid domestic labor, emotional labor, and exploitative conditions dimension that modern world literature often pre-empts.

4 DISCUSSION

The cross-country quantitative study of labor force participation of women has shown that female labor force participation is volatile structurally, biased and not linear at the cross-country level and has been caused by crises instead of progress. Yet, the interest of such discoveries does not simply consist in their descriptive character, but in the implications, they have in a critical sense. The readings within the context of a feminist materialist and intersectional perspective reveal the contradictions inherent in the contradictions embedded within neoliberal capitalism that are actively being told and criticized in the world literature today.

The mid-range rise in the number of women in the labor force between 2000 and 2010 may seem at first glance to indicate gradual inclusion of the gender in the formal economies. However, the leveling and the following downward trend since 2012 make any history of consistent progress troublesome. The feminist materialist theory has long maintained that the growth of capitalism usually relies on the further exploitation of women into precarious markets instead of being redistributive of economic resources. In this respect, the statistics indicate what Nilsson (2020) characterizes as the structural logic of capitalistic inequality, whereby work consumption is accompanied by perennial exploitation. The qualitative terms of employment, the existence of wage differentials and the confinement of women to informal and low-protection employment would be inexplicable by participation statistics alone.

This tension in the structure is especially apparent in the cross-national differences which are detected in the data. The participation rates are high, and they are mostly found in the countries which are basically agricultural, informal labour dominated and lack adequate social welfare facilities. A lot of involvement in such situations is usually economically driven and not empowering. On the other hand, the reduced rates of participation in some areas can exist with better labor protection but with gender norms deeply rooted that prevent women to move freely in economy. These imbalanced trends

highlight the fact that as Rahman (2018) puts it, the economy creates and enforces structural inequality: economic systems are uneven in the distribution of vulnerability, and gender can serve as one of the key directions of this distribution.

The modern world literature offers an important interpretative tool where such disparities could be viewed. According to Lazarus, work and its depiction in world literature cannot be taken out of global processes of capital (Sandwith, 2022). Statistical abstraction is made embodied in literary texts that provide an insight into how women labor, negotiate and resist. High labor participation, as is portrayed in most stories, is not a liberation but rather an exhaustion, fragmentation, and emotional strain. According to Juille and Jullien (2017), the economic agent is also constructed narratively; identity is made with the use of telling stories instead of just being made with economic functionality. In modern fiction, we seldom find a situation where women are described as the neutral elements of labor; rather, the work of women is woven with the issues of dignity, social demand and psychological durability.

This interpretive lens is further heightened by the drop in participation that was witnessed in 2020. This dramatic reduction under the conditions of the global crisis demonstrates the excessive susceptibility of women to the economic shock. According to sociological view, pre-crisis inequalities are increased by crisis-induced precarity (Mehan, 2022). Psychologically, the instability transforms the self-concept and social belonging (Schultz and Schultz, 2020). It is these dimensions, that women face unemployment, informalization or heightened domestic pressures in times of disruption, that is often predicted in literary narratives. The data is therefore the macro-structural validation of the trends which the literary works transform into emotional and symbolic manifestations.

Besides, there is a fundamental weakness of quantitative measurement in the fact that the lack of labor force participation in the statistics of unpaid care work. Feminist theory has always focused on how social reproduction forms the labor of caring, managing the household and maintaining emotions continue to be core to the process of economy but not measurable in the formalized metrics. The importance that Spacks (2022) emphasizes in the historical context of women writing is the questioning of interiority and limitation, and the fact that carrying out the socially prescribed roles entails a psychological burden. This questioning of women is also sustained by contemporary female writers

through stories of the two-fold workload of paid and unpaid labor (Ashfaq, 2024; Shaxzada, 2024). These depictions disrupt the economic discourse, which equates participation with progress.

This analysis is further enhanced by intersectionality. The national comparisons of the dataset imply that the female labor experiences are radically different in terms of geopolitical settings. Stratton (2020) shows how modern African literature puts gendered labor in the context of postcolonial and transnational dynamics of power. In this kind of writing labor has become locked up with race, migration, and historical dispossession. The intersectional analysis consequently avoids generalization of conclusions on women labor and instead prefigures the differentiated vulnerability. Structural inequality is not only economic and mediated by cultural, racial and geopolitical hierarchies (Rahman, 2018).

The conflict between involvement and empowerment is an indication of a greater ideological paradox in the neo-liberal discourse. Gender progress has often been expressed through the increased workforce integration. The statistics, however, reflect inconstancy and ongoing disparities, and the work of literature represents limited agency and negotiated opposition. This paradox is consistent with Marxist commentaries on the ability of capitalism to absorb marginalized populations without breaking the exploitative connections (Nilsson, 2020). The labour of women becomes both obscenely necessary and de facto undervalued both as a necessary factor of structure and as a marginalized social phenomenon.

This study shows how an interdisciplinary approach is methodologically necessary by combining the quantitative data of labor and the qualitative analysis of text. The data shows macro-level tendencies of variation, inequality, and susceptibility. The subjective, symbolic and relational implications of these trends are made known in literature. The combination of these two points reveals the boundaries of statistical visibility and the significance of story in interpreting economic life.

The results indicate that the modern world literature serves as the skeptical record of the gendered contradictions of neoliberal capitalism. Although there has been an increase in the participation of female labor force in most settings, structural precarity, intersectional inequality and the social expectation have continued to influence its participation. The representation of literature is not a simple reflection of economic statistics; it interrogates, reconfigures, and redefines. By so

doing, modern texts have anticipated the future by prefiguring the work of women as a place where the promises of global capitalism to embrace them via a global framework of incorporation are stalled against structural inequalities.

5 CONCLUSION

The paper has revealed that the portrayals of the female labor in the modern world literature could not be interpreted outside of the structural changes of the neoliberal global capitalism. The data analysis of female labor force participation (2000-2024) shows a cyclical trend, vulnerability during crisis and high degree of inequality across nations, which do not support the linear accounts of gender development. Although statistical indicators show increased economic incorporation, they do not reflect the qualitative aspects of precarity of labor, unpaid care, emotional load, and intersectional stratification of those literary texts that eloquently anticipate such aspects. The study has revealed that the modern

narratives reorganize the labor of women as a battleground of economic involvement and structural constraint coupled with negotiated agency through the feminist materialist and intersectional prism. Literature can, therefore, act not only as a reflection but critique, the disenchantment of the contradictions between the discourses of neoliberal empowerment and the prevailing structures of inequality. Combining quantitative trends in labor with the qualitative analysis of texts, this study contributes to the interdisciplinary framework in which the literary space of representation is placed in objective political-economic circumstances, yet the restrictions of economic abstraction are also taken into consideration. In a conclusive fashion, the modern world literature is portrayed as a critical repository of gendered work under global capitalism, which exposes the fact that the visibility in the workforce is not always that which destroys the deeply rooted hierarchies of power, value, and social expectation.

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