



Essay

New Work, Old Inequalities: A Feminist Deconstruction of the Image of the Future of New Work

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Abstract

This paper examines the image of the future New Work from an intersectional feminist perspective to uncover potential blind spots and provide points of reimagination. Using feminist theory in futures research, it examines New Work's goals of empowerment and meaningful work, highlighting how hegemonic power dynamics may perpetuate discrimination and oppression. The analysis reveals that without addressing biases of meritocracy and undervaluation of care work, New Work risks reserving this future of work for an unencumbered default. By integrating feminist insights, the paper suggests ways to make New Work more inclusive, advocating for recognition of various life realities and the inclusion of marginalised voices. Drawing on Ivana Milojević's "The Hesitant Feminist's Guide to the Future", this paper calls for a reimagined New Work that prioritises collective agency, care, and inclusivity.

Keywords

Future of Work, Critical Futures, Feminist Futures, Alternative Futures, Gender Equality

Introduction

The image of the future of "New Work" has gained significant traction in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, offering promises of empowerment, autonomy, and meaningful engagement in the workplace (Müller-Friemuth & Kühn, 2019). Based on Laloux's (2014) vision, New Work is driven by the collective need to create a more humanised work environment that breaks down hierarchies, fosters creativity and self-fulfilment, and embeds purpose and meaning into the performed activity. This vision profiles a new understanding of life and work, characterised by self-organised work practices that signify a change in the guiding principles for entrepreneurial activities. It is therefore an image of the future that offers great potential in transforming the workplace for every individual. However, a critical examination of this concept from an intersectional feminist perspective reveals several blind spots that threaten to perpetuate rather than dismantle existing inequalities. This paper contributes to the symposium by integrating feminist theory into futures studies to promote gender equity, challenging the patriarchal assumptions within New Work and exploring how visions of feminist futures can lead to more inclusive and equitable futures of work. In the words of Milojević (2024): "Feminism gave me 'another pair of spectacles' to put on, in order to both analyse the current (patriarchal) reality and envision alternative futures" (p. 46).

Theoretical Framework

Feminist perspectives have been largely absent in discussions of New Work. Given the implicit normativity in images of the future, it is crucial to examine whether they still perpetuate biases that exclude marginalised communities (cf. Gunnarsson-Östling, 2022; Neuhaus, 2015; Ramos, 2017). Despite not always being numerical

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minorities, these groups, which for example include womxn, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and immigrants, are often treated as inferior by the members of the dominant group (Perkins & Wiley, 2014, p. 1992). Feminist theory, particularly intersectional feminism or the awareness that the impacts of diverse oppressions cannot be comprehended separately (Crenshaw, 1989), challenges these images by revealing the implicit norms and power dynamics that shape them. According to Milojević (2002), the revealing of seemingly “‘objective’ knowledge influenced by the interests and worldview of the dominant gender” is one of the major contributions of feminist theory (p. 19). Therefore, following the monograph, two key efforts are necessary: first, to critically examine and dismantle these perspectives, and second, to imagine alternative, post-patriarchal futures (Milojević, 2024, p. 75). By applying feminist insights, New Work can be deconstructed to reveal structural assumptions that may prevent diverse identities from fully experiencing its potential, while proposing alternative paths for reconstruction. In line with the monograph’s definition of political correctness, this article uses the intersectional term “womxn” instead of “women” to be inclusive of trans* women and non-binary people unless cited otherwise by a previous author or not accounted for in studies (Milojević, 2024, p. 39-44).

Critical Analysis of New Work

Power, privilege, and the illusion of meritocracy

One of the core promises of New Work is its potential to redistribute power within organisations from dominator hierarchies, the prevalent boss-subordinate relationships in today’s organisations to actualising hierarchies of recognition, skill and talent (Laloux, 2014, p. 180). This redistribution is based on the ideal of meritocracy where the idea is that talent and effort will naturally lead to success. However, this principle often masks the systemic inequalities that prevent a truly level playing field. Meritocratic hierarchies hide an institutional white male bias, where womxn, and especially womxn of colour are inversely associated with brilliance, and (white) men are routinely considered more knowledgeable, more “objective, more innately talented” (Criado-Perez, 2019, p. 83).

Over time, through socialisation processes in which acquired skills and hierarchies of influence and reputation are naturalised, role constraints become identity constraints (Becker-Schmidt, 2003). Consequently, womxn internalise their discrimination and develop less self-confidence, which is in turn reinforced by company policies. “Women are conditioned to be modest and are penalised when they step outside of this prescribed gender norm” (Criado-Perez, 2019, p. 88). Those who are already privileged are more likely to succeed in a meritocratic system due to greater access to resources and opportunities that enable them to thrive, participate more frequently in collaborative processes and nominate themselves for promotion. This perpetuates the exclusion of marginalised groups, who are often unable to compete on equal footing due to systemic disadvantages such as gender bias, racial discrimination, or socioeconomic barriers, contributing to the structural violence of identity and purpose described in Milojević’s (2024) “violence typology” (p. 49). In an organisational setting where you must convince the teams that your contribution is valuable to them, but the positioning of individuals in social rankings affects sensitivities and interaction, minorities would have less access to participatory processes. Therefore, the redistribution of power in New Work fails to address deep-seated gender and identity-based imbalances.

Care work: The hidden labour of New Work

New Work’s emphasis on self-actualisation and finding purpose in work warrants further feminist scrutiny. While the idea of work as a means of personal fulfilment is appealing, it rests on assumptions of privilege. For instance, the ability to pursue meaningful work depends on access to resources, such as education, time, and financial security, which are not equally distributed across all workers (Criado-Perez, 2019, p. 108). For many marginalised workers, the luxury of self-actualisation is out of reach due to systemic barriers such as discrimination, precarious employment, and the undervaluation of certain types of work – particularly care work. The undervaluation of care work, historically assigned to womxn (cf. Becker-Schmidt, 2003; Criado-Perez, 2019), exposes a critical blind spot in New Work. Care work, essential for the functioning of both society and the economy, is excluded from discussions of meaningful work. Individual circumstances and changing time constraints are supposed to be temporarily absorbed by the self-organised team. According to Milojević’s (2024) violence typology, a lack of care

work solutions contributes to social silencing and domestic imprisonment. It is a form of direct violence that infringes on freedom, stunts creativity and limits self-expression. Furthermore, it upholds cultural, epistemological, and psychological violence of well-being. In extreme cases, it can even affect survival, with accidental deaths occurring due to overwork and exhaustion (Milojević, 2024, p. 49).

Feminist research therefore reveals tension between the ideals of self-actualization, purpose and the realities of care work and requires solutions for the resulting double burden affecting the participation of labour and value of care work. It also contests New Work hacks such as flexible working hours and locations, as there is a threat that they would contribute to the reversal of collective feminist efforts to dismantle structural inequalities (Villesèche et al. 2022, p. 2). They fall short of the visions of feminism as they treat gender equality as “an asset for business and economic development” and keep womxn in front of their work desk for longer (Espiner, 2018, p. 86). This rather mirrors the way New Work is currently interpreted in making womxn’s performative potential available instead of investigating solutions that pursue sustainable systemic change. There is a distancing from the critique of structural inequalities in favour of a promotion of individualised processes of self-actualisation. By failing to address these issues, New Work risks perpetuating the very inequalities it seeks to eliminate.

The unencumbered worker

Given today’s understanding of gender, the image of the future of New Work is incomplete, limited and simplified. This is evident in the implied standard of an unencumbered worker, someone who is not expected to take on a caregiver role, and who has not been subjected to structural discrimination or forms of oppression. By failing to explicitly address the structural disadvantages some face in society, they seem unchanged in this image of the future. Intersectional entanglements within New Work’s future image are ignored, particularly those affecting groups most impacted by multiple marginalisations, such as womxn of colour, low-income womxn, and single mothers.

As it stands, New Work as an image of the future risks adhering to a traditional patriarchal scenario or, at most, an androgyny scenario. Milojević (2024) describes the former as one that reinforces the male/female polarity, favours men and masculinity through their meritocratic bias and evidently perpetuates an oppressive hierarchy, while in the latter, genders are equal but still conform to the male norm (p.81). Ultimately, this recreates invisible pressures to conform to masculine norms by valuing only economic work and attempting to integrate women into the workforce instead of exploring alternatives that acknowledge and value care work.

Beyond New Work: A Feminist Path Forward

Considering the previous deconstruction, the most pressing question remains: How can feminist theory be integrated into the future vision of New Work to expand its neoliberal interpretation and imagine approaches beyond it? By exploring feminist futures, we can propose alternative paths to the current neoliberal interpretation of New Work for reconstruction. To make New Work a truly inclusive future vision, several elements for reconstruction emerge from this analysis.

“There is a need to understand and problematise the socio-economic and political systems that contribute to uphold gender inequalities and other forms of inequality” (Ruspini & Isaksen, 2021, p. 6). This is where a structural understanding of intersectionality can be incorporated. By highlighting contexts that systematically privilege men and the idea that “no one is really free until the hierarchies of class, race, and gender are destroyed: until non-domination is the condition for everyone” (Einspahr, 2010, p. 16). New Work could frame freedom as structural non-domination, rather than focusing on identity and subjectivity, to avoid overgeneralisation, exclusion and misrecognition. If the realisation of personal needs and the free development of all people through work stand as the normative basis for New Work, then both theorists and practitioners, as well as futures researchers must listen to diverse voices and include their needs in the research findings.

New Work rooted in collective agency & care

The next essential step is to envision alternative structures and processes within New Work. Policies should aim to reduce the disproportionate burden placed on marginalised groups, particularly concerning care responsibilities.

Some of the major measures that affect direct gender participation in the workforce are amongst others parental leave, required timing, wage regulations, and access to social protection of long-term poverty (Rubery, 2019). What if New Work incorporated feminist suggestions, such as Criado-Perez (2019) ideas on collective bargaining and evidence based parental leave, imagining a future of work where retirement plans did not compound old-age poverty for womxn? What could salary agreements look like in a gender-conscious future, as an alternative to the self-set pay approach described in Laloux's (2014) image of the future? What if New Work reimagined alternatives to the uneven division of housework chores within heterosexual partnerships, challenging this deep-rooted behavioural pattern that obstructs equal participation of men and womxn in the labour market? What might alternatives to meritocratic hierarchies look like?

Many feminist researchers have wondered how the indispensable socio-political, cultural and social significance of voluntary work, social commitment, care and family tasks etc. can be recognised financially as it integrates people into a social or communal context of meaning with other people (cf. Criado-Perez, 2019; Lintner, 2018;). Broadening the concept of work could lead to the recognition that leisure activities or shaping personal partnerships may also be considered 'work', allowing the pluralisation of diverse lifestyles, including partnership models beyond the nuclear family (Voß, 2020). Others have welcomed the universal basic income (UBI) to value unpaid care work and as a tool for society to regain control over the economy from market forces (Fraser, 1994). However, this could result in a return to social and political structures that reinforce the gender division of labour unless societal norms change (Rubery, 2019). Riegraf (2019) discusses models of "general employment" and "equality of care work", which presuppose state redistribution and central state control through mechanisms such as tax systems, and she additionally introduces the *Caring Community*, a different perspective relying on decentralised self-organisation forces of society based on a distrust of state intervention and regulation. All these approaches emphasise that a feminist engagement can be supportive in opening paths to designing more just societies that allow all people to live creative and fulfilling lives.

How to reconstruct feminist futures

When evaluating potential scenarios, the Futures Triangle by Inayatullah (2008) contextualises social change by examining three dimensions: the image of the future, which pulls society forward; the pushes of the present, which are the trends driving change; and the weights of the past, which often represent barriers to progress. For instance, while the vision of an equitable future workplace pulls society forward, patriarchal structures from the past act as barriers, while present social movements for gender equality push change forward.

A transformation of work should consequently be grounded in an ethic of care that begins with the knowledge that all human beings need, receive and provide care to others and that care is essential to human survival (Gilligan, as cited in Ruspini & Isaksen, 2021, p. 29). "This influences how society is organised and how resources are distributed. It also influences the public sphere and the sphere of work, including what counts as 'productive' labour that is to be financially compensated" (Milojević, 2024, p. 56).

Recognising the centrality of care is essential for achieving gender equity in the distribution of care work and dismantling the gendered association. A reimagined future of work would focus on gender equality in both the private and public spheres. Drawing from Robertsons's (cited in Milojević, 2024, p. 79) concept of *SHE Futures*, such a future would be grounded in societies that prioritise individual freedom and choice, while embracing empathetic and collective approaches to well-being. For this future to materialise, as 'feminine' constructed values – e.g. caring, nonviolence and empathy – must be revalued and revalued recognised as central to building a better world (Milojević, 2012, p. 66). In this vision, gender equity is not only an outcome but also a necessary foundation for such a world to flourish.

The Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) method can be an effective tool to explore the alternative and diverse futures that feminist scholars and activists have long envisioned as possibilities beyond dominant narratives. Developed by Inayatullah (1998), it is a critical futures research method that unravels deeply rooted worldviews that underlie surface-level appearances. The four layers create distance within a discourse allowing us to "see current social practices as fragile, as particular, and not as universal categories of thought" (Inayatullah 1998: 816). According to Slaughter (1997), CLA offers a richer account of the underlying ideologies, power structures, and cultural narratives shaping futures than traditional empiricist or predictive methods (p. 11). The CLA deconstruction, as detailed in

Table 1, allows for a comprehensive examination of New Work. This analysis reveals the various layers from surface perceptions to myths that shape our understanding of New Work. At the surface level, or the 'litany,' the table highlights promises of empowerment and meaningful work. However, deeper layers reveal systems and androcentric assumptions that perpetuate gender inequalities.

Table 1: CLA Deconstruction Analysis of New Work

Layer	Analysis
Litany	<p>New Work promises empowerment, autonomy and meaningful work. Self-organised teams make decisions, including pay, guided by decentralised structures. Individual circumstances and changing time constraints are supposed to be temporarily absorbed by the self-organised team. A hierarchy of purpose, complexity and scope replaces traditional dominator hierarchies of power. This democratisation aims to help employees grow into the healthiest version of themselves, fostering personal responsibility and reducing alienation from work.</p>
Social causes / System	<p>Meritocratic ideals mask institutional biases, while structural inequalities persist, as self-management assumes equal resources and capacities for all workers, ignoring systemic barriers such as gender, race, and class. Self-set pay structures and decentralised decision-making risk amplifying power imbalances within teams, favouring those with greater confidence or social capital. Flexible working structures inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles, as caregiving responsibilities fall disproportionately on womxn. Success and self-fulfilment are defined within the parameters of professional achievement. Care work remains a societal backdrop, invisible yet crucial, resisting integration into organisational frameworks, perpetuating a double burden on womxn and a privileging of men.</p>
Worldview / Discourse	<p>A patriarchal and individualist value system underpins the vision of New Work, prioritising individual responsibility, self-actualisation, and meritocratic ideals while marginalising collective and care-based needs. The imagined flexibility at work is an operationalisation of feminist ideas into the future workplace framed by a neoliberal ideology. Economic work is viewed as a means of personal growth. The "unencumbered worker" narrative assumes freedom from caregiving roles or systemic oppression, reinforcing androcentric norms.</p>
Myth / Metaphor	<p><i>The Vitruvian Man:</i> The Renaissance drawing by Leonardo da Vinci (1490), the “Vitruvian Man” depicts a nude male figure inscribed in a circle and square according to the idealised proportions formulated by the ancient architect and engineer Vitruv, symbolising the ideal proportions of the human body and the universality of man as the measure of things (Hanses 2024). It reflects the androcentric assumption that can generalise "man" to "human," while construing womxn as specifically gendered (Bailey, LaFrance, Dovidio 2020). New Work mirrors this metaphor by representing the idealised, universal "worker," where male life patterns, experiences, and thought systems are positioned as the normative centre and frames success and fulfilment as accessible to all, hiding the invisible pressures of androgyny where gender equality is pursued under male-normed standards, marginalising diverse gender expressions and perpetuating structural inequalities.</p>

By systematically breaking down each layer as shown in Table 1, alternatives to the neoliberal individualised vision of New Work can be identified and reconstructed in equitable futures. Following this, Table 2 offers an exemplary reconstruction of New Work by rooting it in metaphors of care and collective well-being. This table illustrates how shifting from the ‘Vitruvian Man’ depicted in Table 1 to the ‘Weaving Circle’ in Table 2 opens an alternative future of New Work that incorporates the findings of this analysis. It acknowledges a diversity of gender patterns and reevaluates gender relations and expressions. By doing so, Table 2 highlights how a reimagined future could include a more equitable distribution of power, challenge meritocratic hierarchies, and empower the most vulnerable – moving beyond the image of the “unencumbered male” that dominates current anticipations of New Work.

Table 2: CLA Reconstruction Analysis of New Work

Layer	Analysis
Myth / Metaphor	<p><i>The Weaving Circle:</i> A metaphor inspired by the communal act of weaving, where each thread represents an individual, but the tapestry can only emerge through collective effort and interdependence. While it symbolises shared responsibility, interconnectedness, and valuing care as central to societal and economic life, the process is also one of creative self-expression (Merotto 2023). This practice reflects care as the foundation of a resilient and balanced future, prioritising partnerships and mutual support over individual achievement.</p>
Worldview / Discourse	<p>Based on intersectionality the interconnectedness of gender, race, class, and other identities is recognised to foster equity and inclusion, and ensure systemic barriers are dismantled for all. Gender plurality embraces gender diversity, and the equal value of all identities. Ethics of care are foundational principles for societies, organisations and individual relationships, revaluing empathy, nurturing, and collective well-being. Fluid, egalitarian, and democratic value system is the foundation for this future where power is shared, and gendered constructs are no longer restrictive.</p>
Social Causes / System	<p>Organisations are adaptive, open, and actively set up processes to dismantle social hierarchies. They encourage cooperative achievements over individualistic competition where teams emphasise collective decision-making, shared accountability and participation, ensuring diverse contributions are equally valued. Training and development include participatory approaches, ethics of care and intersectionality as core principles. The representation and inclusion of diverse genders is not just a matter of equity but a core driver of innovation and social cohesion. This encourages a more holistic approach to business and policy development, creating fairer and more just outcomes. The traditional division of labor is replaced with an ecosystem of care. Workplaces provide equitable parental leave, financial recognition of unpaid care work and policies that address gendered care burdens and promote shared accountability. State-supported measures such as gender-sensitive taxation systems and care-related subsidies reinforce structural equity. Interventions focus on historically marginalised groups, including womxn and non-binary individuals, to provide equitable opportunities and support diverse life circumstances.</p>

Litany	<p>New Work promises a future of work where empathy, care, and collective well-being are central to societal and organisational structures. Success is redefined through measures of inclusivity, societal well-being, and community resilience rather than individual merit or economic performance. Organisations value diversity in all forms and create systems that empower individuals to contribute without systemic barriers.</p> <p>Reports highlight reduced inequality, dismantled gender gaps, and improved quality of life as key outcomes. Parenting responsibilities are shared across various family structures, including extended and intergenerational groups.</p>
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Conclusion

“Our imaginations of the future, by and large, do not seem to be particularly imaginative” (Gilbert cited in Milojević, 2024, p. 34), often constrained by capitalist and patriarchal frameworks. The future image of New Work holds both opportunities and risks, so it should neither be welcomed uncritically nor rejected pessimistically. Instead, it is crucial to harness its potential while addressing the identified gaps. This underscores the need for more radical and imaginative approaches to create truly inclusive and equitable futures. As Milojević (2024) notes, “the more radical the proposal for change is, the more likely it will be met by (strong) resistance” (p.38), highlighting the challenges ahead. For New Work to transcend its limitations, it must embrace a broader, more transformative vision that is centred on the principles of care, gives value to caring culture, and (re)evaluates gender relations.

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