

# Neoliberalism, Gender and Higher Education

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- Based on a PhD thesis conducted to critically examine internationalisation in the public universities in Ghana.

# This project



A major theme that emerged from the research was the difficulties confronting academics in the universities.

These difficulties are made more challenging by the neoliberal context in which the universities are now functioning.

Though some of these challenges were discussed in the thesis, there is the need to explore these further and use it to dialogue with women in higher education.

The emphasis is to look at the extent to which these challenges particularly affect females.

## Neoliberalism

- A theory of political and economic practices that proposes that ‘human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade’ (Harvey, 2005: 2).



- An ideological system that holds the 'market' sacred, born within the 'human' or social sciences and refined in a network of Anglo-American-centric knowledge producers...(Bourdieu)





**KEEP  
CALM  
AND  
BE AN  
ENTREPRENEUR**

- It aims at unleashing the entrepreneurial potentials of individuals and organisations to enhance national, organisational and personal development .

Though, there are different definitions and interpretations of neoliberalism, a common trend seems to manifest in all the definitions: the centrality and emphasis of the market and profits.

It is believed that competitive market provides the best avenue for addressing needs of individuals and the efficient allocation and utilisation of resources (Fourcode and Healy, 2007).

- Advocates believe that free markets creates happiness in people because they are able to satisfy their 'needs and desires' (Fourcode and Healy 2007 p. 289). For instance, people feel happier when they are successful in the market (Frey and Stutzer).
- Competitive economy prevents authoritative interference by the government and also prevents few people monopolizing the economy (Fourcode and Healy (2007) ).
- The market develops not only public virtues, but private ones: it empowers people and make people hardworking and creative (Maclosky (2006)).



In terms of national policies it:

- Is associated with the market-centric views including privatisation, wealth creation, deregulation, deep austerity measures
- Limits the government's involvement in the market and encourages competition.
- Expects governments to spend less in providing social services including education and health care, and rather proposes for these services to be privatised.
- Cuts in government subventions



# Critiques of neoliberalism

- Neoliberalism is characterized by the 'death of society' and the rise of 'individuals' who are in need of a new kind of management, surveillance and control. (Davies, et. al. 2005: 344)



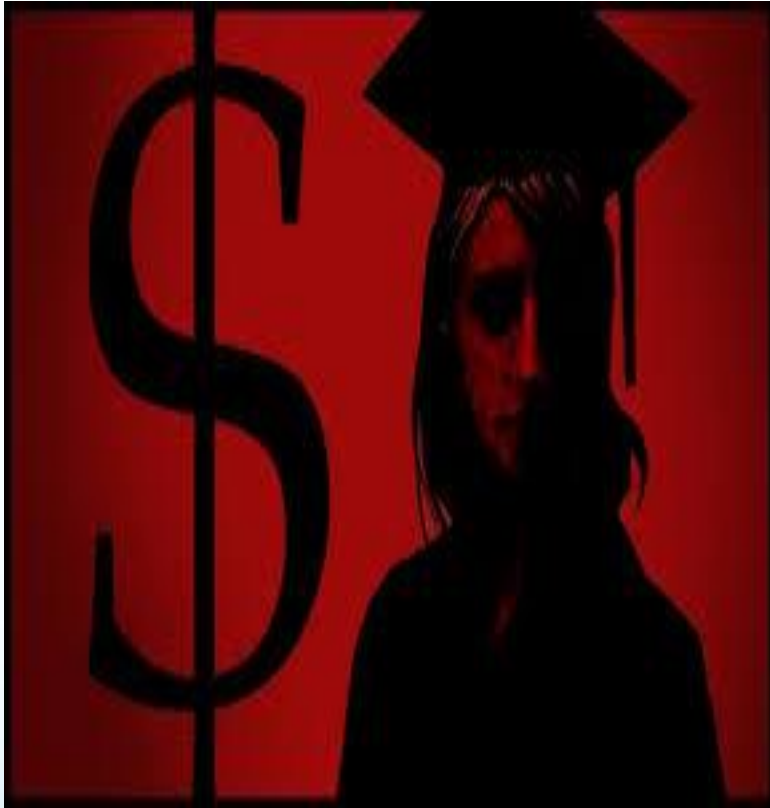
- Meritocracy
- Blind to inequalities
- Self help
- Individualism



- The dominance of neoliberalism in the present world is such that 'it is difficult to think outside of its black box' (Harris, 2005 p. 4).
- It has become the new common sense shaping the role of government and education ( Harvery, 2005; Torres, 2011)



- This “common sense” has percolated into all public and private institutions and, even institutions of higher education



There is now the emergence of 'neoliberal' universities characterised by:

- Coporatisation and militisation of the universities
- Sustained market-like behaviour and governance.
- Instrumental reasoning...competitiveness, excellence and performance' (Harris, 2008: 347).

universities globally, have adopted corporate strategies of competition, self-promotion and being enterprising (Harris, 2011; Torres, 2009, 2011).

Corporate practices include changes in administrative structures and practices, changes in the curriculum, etc. :



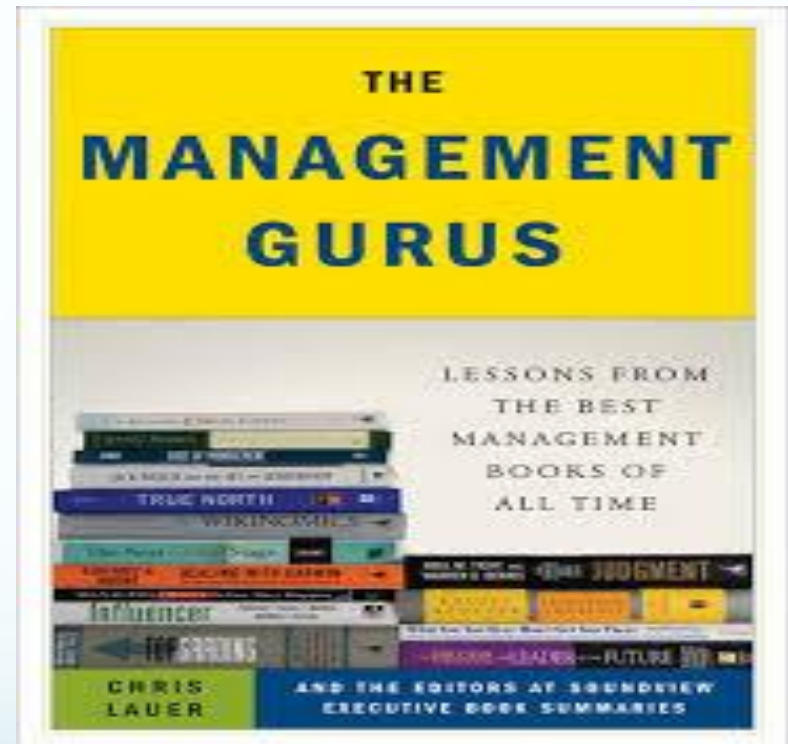


- **Various reforms in the universities** including
- changes in mission statements,
- introduction of competitive and fee paying programmes
- cost sharing and emphasis on wealth creation.



Administrators 'now reading management books written for the corporate world, which explain how managers can bring about reforms quickly' (Currie *et. al.* 2002: 5).

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- Absence of collegial decision making
- Limited access to the information base on which decisions can be made, and many decisions made in secret
- -Universities embarking on business activities

- Commodification of knowledge: knowledge has been reduced to serve primarily economic needs and purposes.
- Knowledge has been reduced to 'what can be measured and standardised' (Harris, 2011: 95)
- The value of knowledge for its own sake has been de-emphasised (Desjardins 2013; Torres and Jones 2013)



Knowledge is now on sale in the market  
like any commodity





- A view that students are basically consumers and faculty providers of a saleable commodity such as a credential or a set of workplace skills.
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## The place of academics



- Academics are presented with tremendous and demanding tasks for which there is little escape.
- There is intensification of work, increased vulnerability and alienation from management
- Squelching of academic freedom



- Academics are perceived as having a monetary value to the institutions and are compelled into performative orientations, in which they must continually produce outputs of value to the institution (Davis, *et. al.* 2005).
- Individuals must always be ready to be rejected as relevant players if they are no longer of any (monetary) value (Ibid).
- In neoliberal discourse, primacy is given to the flexible individuals who acts 'responsibly' in relation to the market and who is valued in market terms.



- There is war on faculty with the on going attempts to impose modes of governance based on a business model
- Faculty are being turned into a labor forces that mimics Walmart workers while the managerial class is expanding, draining off funds from faculty and students, and governing the university as if it were a branch of General Motors and Disneyland (Giroux, 2015).



- In Ghana, the universities and academic life have assumed an increasingly neoliberal position. Heads of departments, Deans and individual academics are expected to develop attractive proposals to attract funding for the institutions.
- The 'publish or perish' maxim has become a compulsive demand. Academics are expected to publish extensively amid other administrative and teaching demands.
- The need to meet assessment of students and general conditions for promotions.
- These expectations, in some cases power fierce competition and individualism.



- As academics strive to fulfill these various demands, they are overcome with 'exhaustion, stress, overload, insomnia, anxiety, shame, aggression, hurt, guilt and feelings of out-of-placeness, fraudulence and fear of exposure within the contemporary academy (Gill 2009: 4).



However:

- ...these feelings, these... experiences, occupy a strange position in relation to questions of secrecy and silence...they...remain largely secret and silenced in the public spaces of the academy (4).

- In many cases, academics are presented with an (often overwhelming) range of pressing choices and administrative tasks for which they are responsible and, having learned...and we shape ourselves (or try to) as the ones who do have (a monetary) value to the organisations we work in.

- Neoliberalism cannot be perceived as something totally external to academics for which they have no influence (Davies *et. al.* 2005) .
- In many cases, academics accept these demands as normal expectations and strive to fulfill them in the wider context of a performative culture (Ball, 2012).
- Any question of the system is trivialized (Davies and Petersen, 2005). The system is, as part of that trivialization, characterised as both natural and inevitable.



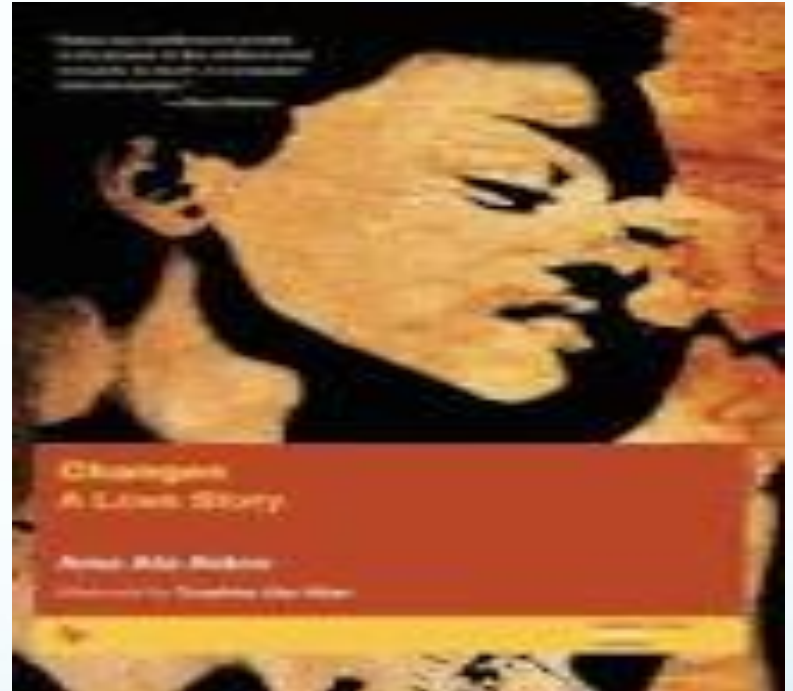
- These demands of neoliberalism, many have argued, impact more negatively on female academics than their male counterparts (Burke, 2012; Currie *et. al.* 2002; Currie and Berverly, 2013, Morley, 2005).
- Even while every academic is expected to concede to the demands connected to neoliberal discourses, women are positioned differently in relation to complex gendered inequalities and power relations (Ibid).
- They have lower salaries, are less represented at top positions and **may even find it difficult to attract funding.**
- They also have to combine these demands with family responsibilities (Mason, *et. al.* 2006; Morley, 2005; Probert, 2005)

- **A major question is ‘why is it that women, having joined the procession, are still at the back of the parade???? (Morley, 2003)**



- In Ghana, a major demand is to fulfill what is often perceived as women's, 'Divine' and 'Existential' roles of becoming wives and mothers.
- As Mbiti said, 'The woman who is not married has practically no role in society, in African traditional world-view. It is expected that all women get married' [1988].
- Though perspectives seem to be changing, as portrayed in Ama Ata Aido's novel, 'Changes: a love story' [1993], the way ahead does not appear to be smooth.

- This book, 'Changes' explores the efforts of professional and highly educated women to change entrenched cultural practices and the complex web in which they find themselves.



- Leaving house virtually at dawn; returning home at dusk; often bringing work home? Then there were all those conferences. Geneva, Addis, Dakar one half of the year; Rome, Lusaka, Lagos the other half. Is Esi too an African woman? She not only is, but there are plenty of them around these days...these days...these days (12).
- **In the end society partially triumphs**

- **Reflective of my thesis** Of the 38 participants (excluding students), only three female academics. In one of the universities, none of the Academics, Deans, Heads of Departments and Administrators I interviewed, was a woman.
- One woman who was an assistant registrar was interviewed in the international office of the University, only because the administrator, a male professor, was not available. In the second university, I interviewed only one woman, and her position was a deputy Dean. Equally in the third university, I interviewed only one woman. She was a Head of Department.
- Similarly, with the Pilot Study, no woman was among the respondents. None of the women I interviewed in all the universities held a professorial position.

- Recently, many studies have confirmed the low participation of women academics globally (eg. Currie, et. al. 2002; She Figures 2009. Singh [2008] reports that in 70% of Commonwealth countries, all universities are led by men.

- A further look at the statistics of the faculty and senior administrators of the universities revealed similar trends across the various universities. At university A, out of the 76 professors, only six are female, and only 73 out of a total of 412 Doctorate holders, are female. Women make up 23.86% of the total teaching and research senior members.
- At University B, there was only one Woman in the professorial position out of a total of 22 professors. Women made 104 out of 640 of total senior academic members and senior staff. At University C, out of a total of five professors, only one woman was a woman, and she is a non-Ghanaian. One of the Universities, had one female in top administrative positions.
- Apart from this University, none of the universities involved in the study had a female in the four top administrative positions: Vice Chancellor, Pro Vice Chancellor, Registrar and the Academic registrar. Statistics of the other universities revealed similar trends.

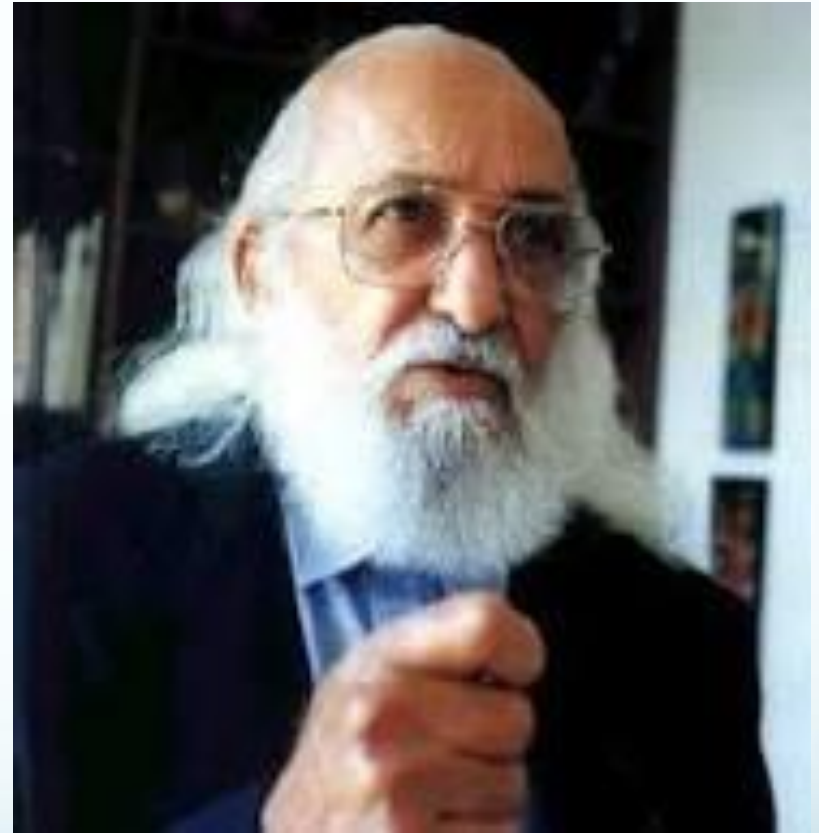
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- The limited number of women participants in administrative positions again, is not limited to the public universities.
- A look at the demographical data of the country reveals an unsurprising trend. The 2010 population census of Ghana indicates that out of a population of 24,658,823, only 16, 660 representing 0.1 per cent of females are pursuing postgraduate degrees [Ghana Statistical Service, 2012].
- Since postgraduate degrees include Diplomas, Certificates and Masters, it is better left to imagination, how many women, out of the 0.1 per cent are pursuing a Phd.

- In Ghana, the need for gender equality continues to be reflected in various government policies, including the 2007 government White paper on educational reforms of the New Patriotic Party, the Better Ghana Agenda of the New Democratic Party, and the Ghana Ministry of Education Sector wide programmes.
- Various policies and administrative structures have been initiated both at the national and institutional levels, in particular, to enhance enrolment and wider participation of women in higher education.
- Various studies and reports indicate that these initiatives have, to some extent, increased female enrolment at various levels of higher education in the country (Manu, et. al. 2007; MOE, 2009).



- Andrea (2008) cites Diane Elson (1992) and Kabeer (2008) as arguing that neoliberalism also has positive benefits on women. Some women they argue, have attained great achievements through meeting neoliberal demands.
- However, as Gill (2009) has highlighted so powerfully, such achievements often come with significant costs.
- In terms of traditional roles, though these have been powerfully brought up by writers including, some females I have talked to think otherwise.

- **Paulo Reglus Neves Freire**  
(1921-1997)
- Brazilian educator and philosopher who was a leading advocate of critical pedagogy.
- Best known for his influential work, pedagogy of the oppressed which is considered one of the foundational texts of the critical pedagogy movement.
- Gradually evolved a method of work with which the word **conscientization** has been associated.



- **CONSCIENTIZATION:** The process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action.
- **Praxis:** It is not enough for people to come together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality. They must act together upon their environment in order critically to reflect upon their reality and so transform it through further action and critical reflection.

- How do we resist and refuse the framework of neoliberalism ??????

- It is important for ways to engage those in more powerful institutional positions, such as senior academics to rethink about these neoliberal discourses shaping the universities
- Females in senior positions in the universities to critique these discourses
- Formation of networks and other collaborations to to mentor especially young academics

- This requires participants not only to analyse and critique hegemonic discourses of 'excellence', 'quality' etc
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# Reflective questions

- What issues and ideas did the presentation raise? In what ways does it help you to reflect on your experiences of being a female academic?
- How did the letters connect (or not) with your experiences and understanding?
- How do the concepts presented in the workshop help you to reflect on the challenges and opportunities for women in higher education in Ghana?
- In what ways do female academics accept, encourage and/or resist neoliberal discourses and expectations in the universities?
- How are your perceptions about the wider literature that certain cultural and traditional expectations impede success of female academics

- Need to dialogue with those in 'high positions' in the universities
- Female senior academics can influence such standardizations
- There should be writings to critique the neoliberal influences
- Come together, form networks to 'resist and refuse' the framework of neoliberalism
- Mentoring



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