

# Maria Mies, 1931-2023

## Fighting housewifisation and reclaiming our planet

Alessandra Mezzadri

When Maria Mies died, on 15 May 2023, I was re-reading her work on India, to reflect on its contemporary relevance for analyses of the world of work. I am profoundly saddened that the first way in which I will use my notes are to write this obituary. Yet, I am also profoundly honoured to celebrate Maria Mies' massive contribution to scholarship and activism. A towering figure in the fields of development sociology, feminist and ecofeminist theory and politics, a life-long activist and vocal ally of anti-imperialist movements everywhere, it is virtually impossible to acknowledge all of Mies' contributions in a short tribute. Here, far more humbly and still feeling the intellectual and emotional pain of her loss – I met her only once in 2018, in Cologne alongside her partner, eco-socialist writer and activist Saral Sarkar, and remember our encounter with great fondness – I shall limit myself to highlighting three key tropes in her intellectual and political life journey that spoke and still speak to me. I consider these tropes as gifts that she has left us, to further nurture and develop, with that form of highly political care labour that shaped Mies' aspirations towards a collectively envisioned 'good life'.<sup>1</sup>

The first gift that Maria Mies leaves us is her understanding of capitalism as a global system reorganising life and production at once, experienced differently across the world economy, and centred on the home as the key patriarchal site of labour-surplus extraction and struggle. Mies is globally renowned for her book *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a Global Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*, originally published by Zed in 1986,<sup>2</sup> and for proposing, in the words of Silvia Federici, who wrote the forward to the latest 2014 edition, 'a vision of world history centred on the "production of life" and the struggles against its exploitation'. Central to Mies'

thinking is the concept of *housewifisation*, that concerns the ways in which capitalism structures patriarchy by constructing women as housewives, homemakers and/or subordinate reproductive labourers, eventually projecting this disadvantage onto the labour market.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst *Patriarchy and Accumulation* is undoubtedly her masterpiece, Mies started developing some of the key analytical categories that would shape her thought a few years earlier, when she completed a shorter and far more empirically grounded book published in 1982, titled *The Lacemakers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market*.<sup>4</sup> The work at the basis of this early book was funded by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in the context of its World Employment Programme (WEP), which started in 1969 with the aim of mapping the world of supposed unemployment in what was then referred to as the 'Third World', now renamed – a definition also marred by its own analytical and political problems – the 'Global South'.<sup>5</sup> The main contribution of the WEP is the 'discovery' of the informal sector; a segment of the economy not characterised by unemployment, as per the initial hypothesis by the ILO, but by the underemployment of a large pool of people labelled in Keith Hart's famous Kenya report as its 'working poor', which would become a key subject of development interventions and remains so to date.<sup>6</sup> Yet, while far less acknowledged in the development studies literature, *The Lacemakers* was a groundbreaking contribution. In Narsapur, a small town in Andhra Pradesh, one could say that Mies discovered how the whole world works.

In Narsapur, Mies understood that labour could be organised in life spaces in ways that regenerated an invisible assembly line running across the reproductive economy; a way of perfecting and fine-tuning the colo-

nial putting-out system that infiltrated the home and turned it into both a unit of subsistence and a manufacturing production unit.<sup>7</sup> The system relied entirely on the extraction and appropriation of women's labour at cheap rates, as lacemaking was a woman's preserve learnt during the colonial period. Yet the whole decentralised system of production was dominated by men, with merchants towering over the top of the lace-making chain and organising a complex spiderweb of contractors under them. This homes-centred 'diffuse factory' was caste-bound and classed, besides being gendered, with the original Christian former low-caste women lace-makers being progressively pushed out of the industry during the export boom to be replaced with a larger pool of impoverished women from a variety of communities including upper-caste ones.<sup>8</sup> In short, as Keith Hart was coining what became the key definitions and actors of the informal sector or economy, Maria Mies was mapping its internal mechanisms of exploitation, and its most invisibilised gendered and racial aspects.



The domestication – or semi-domestication – of the lacemakers of Narsapur was based on their representation as housewives and the representation of their labour as housework, a key insight that Mies develops in the conclusion – and in the last endnotes – of *The Lacemakers*. It is here that she deploys the term 'housewifisation' for the first time, a key concept that she then developed more fully in *Patriarchy and Accumulation*. 'Housewifisation', Mies writes, 'expresses more concretely the specifically modern form of control over women occurring in this case than does the term domestication. I define housewifisation as a process by which women are socially defined as housewives, dependent for their sustenance on the in-

come of the husband, irrespective of whether they are de facto housewives or not ... It leads to defining the bulk of women's subsistence work as non-work and hence open to unrestricted exploitation'<sup>9</sup>.

Half a century on, housewifisation still defines the lives of millions of women across the globe. In fact, it has further extended its reach and role within contemporary capitalist accumulation, as I and others have shown.<sup>10</sup> First, in India, as elsewhere across the world economy, the bulk of women's employment continues being statistically mischaracterised as 'housework' and excluded from the computation of what represents employment proper.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, the regeneration of homeworking within the world system – which was never to be a transitory form of work eventually leading to 'free' wage labour, as Mies wrote very clearly in *The Lacemakers*<sup>12</sup> – has also extended the analytical reach of *housewifisation* to men too. Those performing 'homework', often situated at the margins of increasingly globalised supply chains, also see their labour devalued and represented as lying outside the 'proper' wage relation – indeed, a declination of women's work. Maria Mies' work speaks to the organisation of manufacturing in neoliberal times, and to the many 'forms of exploitation' – to deploy an expression by Jairus Banaji – that characterise it.<sup>13</sup>

The second trope in Maria Mies' work concerns her commitment to nature and the planet, by denouncing and fighting the commodification, extraction and depletion of human and natural resources imposed by capitalism. In fact, intersectional concerns on the ways in which capitalism subjugates both women and nature were already central to *Patriarchy and Accumulation*. Yet, it is in the book *Ecofeminism*, written with Vandana Shiva, that they are more carefully spelt out. Mies' and Shiva's *Ecofeminism* is aligned with the work of other feminist scholars concerned with the environment, like Françoise d'Eaubonne – who coined the term *Ecofeminism* in the first instance – as well as Carolyn Merchant,<sup>14</sup> Wangari Mathaai,<sup>15</sup> Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen,<sup>16</sup> Ariel Salleh,<sup>17</sup> Ana Isla,<sup>18</sup> Mary Mellor,<sup>19</sup> as well as many feminist Indigenous collectives across our planet, who constantly write *Ecofeminism* by doing.<sup>20</sup> It is another ground-breaking text and political manifesto denouncing the interwoven socially depleting, ecocidal features of capitalism. Across the twenty essays of this text, the authors connect patriarchal accumulation to the ex-

appropriation and plunder of our ecosystems, representing women and nature as ‘the last colony’.<sup>21</sup> Intrinsic to Mies’ thought, here, is the immanent critique of modernity and its simplistic dichotomies, which nevertheless shape reality as we know it so that:

[M]odern civilisation is based on a cosmology and anthropology that structurally dichotomizes reality, and hierarchically opposes the two parts to each other: the one always considered superior, always *thriving*, and progressing at the expense of the other. Thus, nature is subordinated to man; woman to man, consumption to production and the local to the global, and so on.<sup>22</sup>

At times wrongly trivialised as an analysis comparing *ad litteram* the exploitation of women and that of the environment – and a text that must be approached with some sense of history<sup>23</sup> – *Ecofeminism* is better read as a pioneering analysis of the interconnections between the social and ecological destruction caused by unbridled capitalism. *Ecofeminism* provides an analysis of global capitalist production that systematically cheapens the work and lives of some communities (women, many of whom are Indigenous, colonised and racialised people), and also devalues the ‘fruits’ of nature, which are appropriated through processes of brutal plunder and enclosure often enforced against those same communities. Here, the trope of a continuous, ongoing process of primitive accumulation – which Mies already mentioned in 1982 in *The Lacemakers*, well before the systematic analysis developed by David Harvey on processes of accumulation by dispossession<sup>24</sup> – as affecting some people and some lands is more carefully developed. One of the most compelling contemporary avatars of Mies and Shiva’s ecofeminist analysis is developed by Stefania Barca’s *Forces of Reproduction* (2020), which illustrates the interconnections between patriarchy, violence against Indigenous communities and activists and ecocide.<sup>25</sup>

Given the ongoing, mounting violence against women, people of colour and our planet, and in the age of global pandemics like the one we are still battling, many of the insights from *Ecofeminism* could not remain more compelling to contemporary decolonial debates and degrowth arguments. Indeed, in later work with Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, and drawing on decolonial and anticolonial collective, anti-capitalist practices across the world, Mies wrote the key elements of their book *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy*, a

utopian, radical alternative to the free-market industrial system which must be dismantled.<sup>26</sup> As signalled by Ariel Salleh in her forward to the 2013 edition of *Ecofeminism*, ‘[t]he call is for degrowth, commoning and *Buen Vivir*’.

Finally, a third trope in Maria Mies’ work we need to carry with us is her unflinching commitment to anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles and her prompt denunciation of the neocolonial violence imposed by international financial institutions on vast parts of the world. Examples of her activism and allyship are numerous, and choosing one to reflect on does feel arbitrary. Yet, inspired by the desire to illustrate the contemporary impact and significance of Mies’ work and political commitments, I will do so. My choice speaks to the picture chosen for this obituary, of Maria standing in front of an anti-International Monetary Fund and anti-World Bank banner. Mies started writing against International Financial and Trade Institutions (IFTIs) already in the early 1970s, denouncing the neocolonial trade policies and corporate logics promoted by the then General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), now World Trade Organization (WTO), the agrarian knowledge hegemony exercised by agencies like the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), and the financial plunder orchestrated by the IMF and the World Bank.<sup>27</sup> Today, as feminist and ecological justice organisations worldwide continue mobilising against IFTIs-imposed conditionalities and debt and its repercussions on societies’ gendered fabric,<sup>28</sup> or against global corporate socio-ecological plunder often involving the target-killing of Indigenous activists,<sup>29</sup> Maria Mies’ analyses and activism could not appear more relevant. They are intergenerational, intellectual and political gifts that we need to carry with us and nurture – for *our* life, *our* times.

Rest in Power, Maria Mies. You are now the seed.

## Notes

1. See Mies’ own biography *The Village and the World: My Life, Our Times* (Australia: Spinifex Press, 2010).
2. Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a Global Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*, (London: Zed Books, 1986).
3. Yet, patriarchal relations may vary massively based on the type of labour subordination to capital. On this point, in *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, Mies relies significantly on Rhoda Reddock’s insights in relation to slavery. See Rhoda Reddock, ‘Women’s Liberation and National Lib-

- eration' in Mies and Reddock, eds., *National Liberation and Women's Liberation* (The Hague: Institute of Social Studies, 1982).
4. Maria Mies, *The Lacemakers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market* (Geneva: ILO, 1982).
  5. On this issue, see A. Sajed 'From the Third World to the Global South' *E- International Relations* (2020), <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/07/27/from-the-third-world-to-the-global-south/>
  6. K. Hart, *Kenya Report* (Geneva: ILO 1973), in C.O.N. Moser, 'Informal sector or petty commodity production: Dualism or dependence in urban development?', *World Development* 6:9-10 (1978), 1041-1064.
  7. Mies, *The Lacemakers*, 57.
  8. *Ibid.*, 58.
  9. *Ibid.*, 180.
  10. See Alessandra Mezzadri, *The Sweatshop Regime: Labouring Bodies, Exploitation, and Garments Made in India* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).
  11. The reader can refer to S. Naidu and L. Osome, 'Social Reproduction and the Agrarian Question of Women's Labour in India', *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 5:1 (2016), 50-76.
  12. Mies, *The Lacemakers*, 4.
  13. J. Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (London: Brill, 2010).
  14. See C. Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980); *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
  15. W. Mathaai, *Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (New York: Lanterns Book, 1985).
  16. Co-authored with Mies *The Subsistence Perspective*, introduced later.
  17. See A. Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern* (London: Zed Books, 1997). Here, ecofeminism is understood as the political synthesis of four revolutions: the environmental justice movement, feminism, socialism, and post-colonial struggle.
  18. A. Isla, *The "Greening" of Costa Rica: Women, Peasants, Indigenous People and the Remaking of Nature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015); *Climate Chaos: Ecofeminism and the Land Question* (Toronto: Inanna Publications, 2019).
  19. M. Mellor, *Feminism and Ecology* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).
  20. For her dedication to environmental conservation and women's rights, Mathaai was awarded the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize for her 'contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace'.
  21. See also M. Mies, V. Bennholdt-Thomsen and C. von Werlhof, *Women, the Last Colony* (London: Zed, 1988).
  22. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (Fernwood, 1993), 5.
  23. For instance, the debate on reproductive technologies is clearly marred by gender essentialism.
  24. David Harvey, 'The "New" Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession', *Socialist Register* 40 (2004), 63-87.
  25. S. Barca, *Forces of Reproduction: Notes for a Counter-Hegemonic Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2020).
  26. M. Mies and V. Bennholdt-Thomsen, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy* (London: Zed Books, 1999).
  27. She wrote of these experiences in *The Village and the World*.
  28. See, for instance, Veronica Gago's and Luci Caballero's analysis in the book *A Feminist Reading of Debt* (Pluto Press, 2020), illustrating the interconnections between debt as a macroeconomic relation and patriarchal violence in Argentinian households and streets.
  29. Over two hundred people are killed each year whilst defending their land and environment. See updated estimates (last update May 2013) at <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/decade-defiance/>