

A Comparative Analysis of Gender Equality Paths in Socialist and Liberal Capitalist Regimes

Chenshu Xia

*University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom
2896848X@student.gla.ac.uk*

Abstract. Debates over whether it is “better” to be a woman under a liberal capitalist regime or a socialist one often oppose formal freedoms to authoritarian constraint. This article argues that such a binary obscures the ways different political economies shape the practical conditions of women’s lives. Drawing on secondary scholarship on East Germany, India, Tanzania, Romania and other contexts, it employs a thematic comparison of labour-market participation, childcare provision, welfare regimes and feminist mobilisation. The analysis shows that socialist regimes, despite serious political shortcomings and persistent patriarchal norms, tended to institutionalise more redistributive and inclusive frameworks for gender equality than liberal capitalist systems, particularly for working-class and marginalised women. Liberal democracies prioritised individual rights and market freedom, but frequently failed to provide the social infrastructure necessary to exercise those rights on equal terms. The article concludes that socialist models of state-led redistribution offered a more substantial—if deeply contradictory—basis for gender equality than the market-centred logic of liberal capitalism, while also highlighting the paternalism and cultural conservatism that limited socialist achievements.

Keywords: Gender equality, Socialism, Liberalism, State feminism, Welfare regimes

1. Introduction

The notion of “better” in the context of being a woman under a liberal capitalist regime versus a socialist one is far from straightforward. Liberal democracies champion freedom of choice and individual rights, promising women autonomy in the workplace, education and intimate life. Yet formal equality before the law does not automatically translate into equal access to rights. Without affordable childcare, secure employment or accessible healthcare, the freedom to choose often remains a privilege for those who can pay for it. Socialist regimes, by contrast, are commonly criticised for authoritarianism and ideological control, but they institutionalised gender equality more systematically—offering women not only the right to work or vote, but, at least in principle, the material conditions to exercise those rights [1].

This essay argues that, despite their political limitations, socialist regimes provided a more inclusive and redistributive model for gender equality than liberal capitalist regimes. The latter’s rhetoric of freedom often obscures their reliance on market mechanisms that reproduce socio-economic inequality. By examining women’s experiences in socialist and capitalist contexts, the

essay explores how state-led policies such as employment guarantees, childcare services and healthcare created structural empowerment. It contrasts these with liberal democracies where the burden of translating formal rights into lived equality falls largely on individuals and families.

The discussion proceeds in three stages. The first section analyses how socialist states constructed structural empowerment through labour, welfare and family policy, focusing on examples such as East Germany and India. The second section examines the contradictions of state feminism, showing how socialist regimes combined material support with cultural conservatism and paternalism. The third section turns to liberal capitalist regimes, arguing that their dependence on markets and individualised responsibility limits the egalitarian potential of legal rights. The conclusion reflects on what is at stake in comparing these models and what they reveal about the relationship between gender, capitalism and state power.

2. The complexity of gender equality under two regimes

2.1. Structural empowerment under socialism: from policy frameworks to practical autonomy

In debates about gender equality, liberal regimes are often valorised for their association with freedom, legal rights and personal autonomy. Yet such celebrations frequently conceal the extent to which access to rights is mediated by class, race and family status. A woman may be legally free to work, study or control her reproduction, but without structural support—childcare, healthcare, employment guarantees—that freedom is unevenly distributed. Socialist regimes, for all their political limitations, sought to embed women's rights within the architecture of the state. Their strength lay less in symbolic inclusion and more in the redistribution of social responsibility for care and labour [2].

East Germany offers a particularly striking example of how this structural model operated. By the mid-1980s, nearly 89 per cent of women were formally employed, and over 95 per cent of children aged three to six were enrolled in public childcare [1]. These levels of participation were not simply the by-product of economic necessity; they reflected a deliberate state agenda to integrate women into socialist production and to socialise part of the reproductive labour traditionally carried out in the home. Childcare, paid maternity leave and job security were framed as social entitlements rather than discretionary benefits. In contrast, contemporaneous West Germany lacked comparable public provision, and women's participation in paid labour remained closely tied to marital and class position despite comparable legal rights.

Kristen Ghodsee has argued that the socialist commitment to women's economic independence treated autonomy not merely as a legal possibility but as a policy objective [1]. By delivering the material preconditions for choice—employment, housing, childcare and healthcare—the state redefined gender equality as a collective responsibility rather than a private struggle. This conception of practical autonomy diverges sharply from liberal understandings of freedom as the absence of interference. In liberal democracies, where access to autonomy is filtered through commodified services and competitive labour markets, women's ability to exercise rights is contingent on income and social capital.

However, socialist approaches to gender equality were neither uniform nor consistently egalitarian. India under Jawaharlal Nehru demonstrates how state feminism could be ambitious in scope yet limited in reach. The Central Social Welfare Board, established in 1953, channelled resources into women's organisations, but these were largely elite-dominated and urban in orientation. As T. C. Sherman shows, the Board often operated through upper-middle-class voluntary associations that claimed to speak for "Indian womanhood" while marginalising the

working-class and rural women whose lives were most constrained [3]. Reforms that appeared emancipatory on paper were frequently bureaucratic and developmentalist in practice, more concerned with producing modern, respectable citizens than redistributing power.

What emerges from these examples is a complex picture. Socialist regimes were capable of creating robust institutional frameworks that supported women's participation in paid work and public life. They expanded access to childcare, education and healthcare on a scale rarely matched in liberal democracies. At the same time, their policies were mediated by existing class hierarchies, urban–rural divides and nationalist projects. Structural empowerment under socialism therefore needs to be evaluated not only by the breadth of formal provision, but also by the question of which women were most able to benefit from it.

2.2. Contradictions in socialist gender policy: structural empowerment and cultural conservatism

If socialist states reconfigured the public sphere in more egalitarian ways, the private sphere of home and intimacy proved far more resistant to transformation. Rights were written into law and woven into institutional routines, yet everyday gender relations often continued to reflect deeply entrenched patriarchal expectations. A woman might spend her day fulfilling the state's vision of productive citizenship only to return to a household where she remained primarily responsible for domestic labour and emotional care. The resulting dissonance was not an incidental flaw but a structural silence within state feminism itself.

The German Democratic Republic again illustrates this tension. While the GDR achieved near-universal female employment and extensive childcare coverage, domestic responsibilities remained overwhelmingly feminised. As Donna Harsch notes, “household responsibilities remained firmly women's, despite full employment,” and the ideal socialist woman was celebrated less as an autonomous subject than as a heroic multitasker who combined factory productivity with selfless motherhood [4]. Rather than dismantling the gendered division of labour, the state absorbed women's unpaid care work into its economic rationality, rearticulating patriarchal norms through the language of productivity and national development.

Similar dynamics appeared elsewhere in the socialist world. In Tanzania, women were constructed as “mothers of the nation,” a figure that Priya Lal shows both “embodied empowerment and subordination” [5]. Ujamaa socialism expanded access to healthcare and education, but it also demanded moral discipline, rural labour and reproductive contribution. Women's political significance was grounded in their biological and domestic roles, reinforcing a narrow, heteronormative model of citizenship. The Tanzanian case underscores how state feminism in decolonising contexts could simultaneously challenge colonial hierarchies and stabilise conservative family structures.

Soviet cultural production reveals another dimension of these contradictions. In the 1960s, Soviet media represented revolutionary Cuba as a site of exotic passion, frequently depicting Cuban women as at once militant and sensual. Anne Gorsuch argues that such portrayals “reduced women to exoticised emblems of freedom”, collapsing their political agency into a stylised, sexualised iconography [6]. These images suggested that, even within avowedly revolutionary cultures, women's bodies remained crucial sites of symbolic control and fantasy.

At the level of ideology and policy, socialist regimes often reasserted traditional expectations around femininity even as they proclaimed gender equality. Mary Buckley's study of Soviet discourse shows how official narratives cast women as both productive workers and “natural” mothers, treating their labour value as an extension of their reproductive capacity [7]. The same

system that subsidised crèches and guaranteed maternity leave also judged single mothers, regulated abortion access and pathologised “unfeminine” behaviour [7]. Empowerment was thus delivered through institutions that simultaneously disciplined women’s sexuality and family choices.

These examples suggest that the power of state feminism lay in its capacity to redistribute resources and reshape public institutions, but its limits were equally structural. Socialist regimes granted extensive social rights, yet these were conditional upon conformity to idealised forms of womanhood coded as self-sacrificing, heteronormative and nationally loyal. Recent comparative work on authoritarian regimes cautions against assuming that such rights are either superficial or merely propagandistic; they can generate tangible gains while also consolidating non-democratic authority [8]. What distinguishes socialist projects of gender equality, then, is not their freedom from contradiction but the particular way they entangle redistributive commitments with paternalistic control.

2.3. Formal freedom under liberal capitalism: market logic as a constraint on equality

If socialist regimes risked delivering equality through paternalistic structures, liberal capitalist regimes offered a different bargain: the promise of individual freedom without comparable guarantees of material support. Liberal states typically frame gender equality in terms of anti-discrimination law, reproductive rights and freedom of contract. These are significant achievements. Yet, as Susan Gal and Gail Kligman argue, market economies tend to privatise gender inequalities by shifting the costs of care and social reproduction onto households and voluntary organisations [2]. The result is a model in which women’s enjoyment of rights depends heavily on their class position, race and family situation.

The post-socialist transformations of Eastern Europe illuminate the consequences of this shift particularly clearly. In Romania, the transition from state socialism to neoliberal capitalism entailed massive cuts to public childcare, healthcare and employment protections. Jill Massino shows how women’s labour-force participation declined, reproductive services became harder to access and the gendered division of labour in the home re-intensified [9]. The state’s retreat from welfare provision assumed that families and markets would absorb its former responsibilities. But markets do not care for children, and families structured by patriarchal norms rarely distribute domestic labour equally [9]. For many Romanian women, the advent of liberal democracy meant an expansion of political rights accompanied by a contraction of social rights.

Proponents of liberalism might respond that democratic institutions and civil society offer alternative avenues for pursuing gender justice. Feminist movements in capitalist democracies have indeed achieved important legal reforms and shifts in public discourse. Yet these gains are uneven and often fragile. Francisca de Haan has shown how Cold War paradigms in Western historiography and activism constructed “the West” as the natural home of feminist modernity while marginalising the experiences of women in socialist and post-colonial contexts [10]. Such narratives reinforce an uncritical association between liberal democracy and gender progress, obscuring the extent to which rights-based victories disproportionately benefit those with the resources to mobilise.

Moreover, contemporary liberal feminism has sometimes become entangled with financialised capitalism. Y. Shi argues that when feminist agendas focus primarily on breaking glass ceilings or promoting individual “empowerment,” they can collude with neoliberal restructuring by legitimising precarious labour and austerity policies that harm poorer women [11]. Under these conditions, gender equality is recast as a question of meritocratic access to elite positions rather than the redistribution of wealth, time and care. Saskia Wieringa’s work on women’s movements in the

global South similarly highlights how donor-driven projects can prioritise technocratic deliverables over grassroots organising, diluting more radical challenges to patriarchal and economic power [12].

Historical studies of social democracy also reveal the limits of liberal or centre-left parties in addressing gender inequality. Jean Quataert's analysis of German Social Democracy before 1914 shows how male trade unionists and party leaders consistently sidelined feminist demands, treating them as secondary to class struggle [13]. This pattern points to a broader dilemma: even political actors committed to egalitarian ideals may reproduce gender hierarchies when they treat care, reproduction and domestic labour as private matters rather than as central to economic and political life.

Taken together, these critiques suggest that liberal capitalism's primary weakness lies not in the absence of rights but in its reluctance to confront the structural conditions that make rights meaningful. Where socialist regimes attempted—however imperfectly—to socialise aspects of care and reproduction, liberal regimes typically assume that these responsibilities will be managed privately. For women with secure incomes, supportive partners and access to commodified services, liberal freedoms can be substantial. For those in precarious employment, single-parent households or marginalised communities, they remain far more fragile. Liberalism may open the legal gate, but it rarely builds the social road that leads through it.

3. Discussion

This essay has argued that while both socialist and liberal capitalist regimes have promised gender equality, their capacity to deliver it has differed significantly in practice. Socialist states institutionalised wide-ranging social rights that provided many women with unprecedented access to employment, education, childcare and healthcare. Policies in places such as East Germany and Tanzania created forms of structural autonomy that were largely absent in contemporaneous liberal democracies [4,5]. At the same time, socialist gender projects were constrained by cultural conservatism and paternalistic control. They expanded women's opportunities in the public sphere while leaving domestic labour and intimate life deeply gendered, and they often demanded ideological conformity in exchange for social rights.

Liberal capitalist regimes, by contrast, foreground individual liberty and formal equality before the law. Yet their reliance on markets and private households to deliver the conditions of autonomy produces sharply unequal outcomes. The Romanian experience after 1989 [9], along with broader critiques of neoliberal feminism [11], shows how the retreat of the welfare state and the commodification of social reproduction can undermine women's material security even as legal protections advance. Feminist movements within liberal democracies have achieved important gains [10], but these achievements remain uneven and vulnerable in the absence of robust redistributive frameworks.

The comparison does not yield a simple answer to the question of whether it is “better” to be a woman under socialism or liberal capitalism. For middle-class women with substantial resources, liberal regimes may offer wider spaces for dissent, mobility and lifestyle pluralism. For working-class and marginalised women, the socialist commitment to universal employment, childcare and welfare often provided more reliable foundations for everyday autonomy—even as it constrained political freedoms and reinforced normative femininity. What the contrast ultimately reveals is that meaningful gender equality requires both structural redistribution and protection of civil and political rights.

Rather than treating socialism and liberal capitalism as mutually exclusive models, future debates might focus on how the redistributive ambitions of state feminism can be disentangled from

authoritarian control, and how liberal democracies can move beyond market-centred notions of freedom. Any serious project of gender justice must confront not only legal discrimination but also the organisation of work, care and social reproduction. On that metric, the socialist experiments of the twentieth century, despite their failures, still pose uncomfortable questions for contemporary liberal capitalism—questions that remain unresolved for women across regimes today.

4. Conclusion

This essay has argued that the question of whether it is “better” to be a woman under socialism or liberal capitalism cannot be settled by appealing to regime labels alone. What matters, instead, is how different systems configure the relationship between rights, resources and responsibilities, and how those configurations are experienced by women in unequal social positions. The comparison undertaken here suggests that socialist projects, for all their contradictions, came closer to treating gender equality as a collective obligation, while liberal capitalist regimes tended to individualise both the benefits and the burdens of pursuing autonomy. Neither model delivered unambiguous emancipation; each organised a different set of trade-offs between material security, political freedom and normative expectations around gender.

At the same time, the analysis presented is necessarily partial. It has focused on a small number of national cases, relied largely on secondary literature and concentrated on the late twentieth century. Important dimensions of women’s lives—such as race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and regional variation within states—have only been addressed indirectly, if at all. Nor has it been possible to explore systematically how women of different classes and generations interpreted and negotiated the promises and constraints of the regimes under which they lived. These limitations mean that the conclusions offered here should be read as provisional and situated, rather than as definitive judgements about “socialism” or “liberalism” in the abstract.

Future research could therefore move beyond broad regime comparisons to examine more closely the everyday practices through which women made use of, resisted or reworked the gender policies of different states. Intersectional and transnational approaches would be especially valuable in tracing how class, race and global power relations shaped access to both social rights and civil liberties. It would also be worth investigating contemporary policy experiments that seek to combine strong redistributive commitments with robust protections for political and personal freedoms. Such work would not resolve all of the tensions identified here, but it could deepen our understanding of what a more substantive and sustainable project of gender equality might require across, and perhaps beyond, existing regime types.

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