Women's equality in the era of permacrisis

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Permacrisis implies a permanent state of crisis, contrasting with polycrisis and intracrisis, which refer to crises in several fields that can be investigated and resolved. Women's equality has been a longstanding issue, analyzed theoretically and through research exploring persistent and pervasive inequality in all areas of life. This study discusses the concept of permacrisis from a gender perspective and presents research highlighting the effects of interconnected crises on women's rights and societal presence. Ongoing crises—economic, environmental, political, and educational—have been exacerbated by temporary wars, climate change, pandemics, and disputes over international institutions for the protection of human rights and the vulnerable populations. These issues, combined with ineffective political leadership, have made women's equality an increasingly distant goal. This situation calls for new analytical frameworks that go beyond the pessimism of permacrisis and lead to what can be termed a meta-crisis, a transcendence of current obstacles. Thus, the main aims of this study are two-fold: First, to discuss permacrisis from a gender perspective, and second, to propose research evidence showing that gender inequality as an inherent aspect of permacrisis requires new theoretical insights for effective analysis.

KEYWORDS

gender, women's inequality, permacrisis, intracrisis learning, hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy

1 Introduction

Permacrisis, polycrisis, intercrisis, and intracrisis are not interchangeable terms for crisis, nor are they similar expressions; each of these terms implies different philosophical assumptions and attitudes toward crisis, leading to diverse principles of discussion and conclusions. Intercrisis appears to affect intracrisis, with permacrisis indicating a dead end, unlike polycrisis, which calls for counteracting measures in some dimensions and fields. A crisis represents a pivotal point where changes can be made to address imbalances in the system and produce unpredictable outcomes. It serves as a warning bell for action.

Dekker and Hansén (2004) consider intercrisis an opportunity for reflection and new action, suggesting that it involves interpreting and using both old and new information. This perspective leads to intracrisis learning, which provides the opportunity to learn from one another, as emphasized by Moynihan (2009).

Women's history advocates that women have often been marginalized in historical narratives. We can study women as a collective group, rather than as individuals, through the lens of men and their struggles. This approach reveals the pathologies of gender inequality across economic, social, educational, and political spheres in different countries. Moreover, history records which institutions have contributed to the perception of women as 'the weaker sex' and how this view has persisted over time. In this context, women's equality appears to be increasingly out of reach, necessitating new analytical frameworks that transcend the obstacles and pessimism of permacrisis, leading to a meta-crisis.

Thus, the main aim of this article is two-fold: first, to discuss permacrisis from a gender perspective, and second, to propose research evidence showing that gender inequality, as an inherent dimension of permacrisis, requires new theoretical insights for its analysis.

2 Methodology

The world of intercrisis requires new philosophical and practical lenses to understand its complexity. A comparative approach is necessary to uncover the roots of changes that historically led to recurring weaknesses and imbalances in various areas affecting progress. Therefore, analyzing permacrisis from a gender perspective necessitates a comparative approach based on the grounded theory, as it has the potential to generate new insights, especially when enriched with a historical perspective.

To clarify, the purpose of this study is not to focus on women's historiography but to highlight the political, economic, and educational aspects of women's subordination through a politicized gender lens.

The historical approach provides a framework for understanding data that change over time while the crisis persists, allowing us to identify themes that lead to a chronic, permanent crisis. Moreover, the historical approach facilitates intracrisis learning.

Moynihan (2009) defines "intracrisis learning" as learning from one another during crises within organizations. In this study, we extend the meaning of intracrisis learning, emphasizing learning from one historical period and its institutions to another. This approach helps uncover what has kept women in the shadows of history and in a permanent crisis. It is well known that the relations of power and control in society are historical and institutional. They originate from the establishment and function of societal institutions, and their patriarchal identity continues to shape gender understanding.

The assumption that the crisis of institutions, whether social, economic, educational, or political, reflects on gender relations and reconstructs the gendered balance either positively or by exaggerating inequalities has not been thoroughly examined. However, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been extensively studied (i.e., Butler, 1991; Koutselini and Agathangelou, 2013). The term "hegemonic masculinity," from the study of Connell (1987, 1995), refers to the interests of the powerful masculine group in society. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity represents the ideal form of manhood, characterized by traits of superiority and power, and it excludes those who do not possess them. In this context, men without hegemonic characteristics – and, of course, all women—are excluded from social and political power.

An analysis of historical documents revealed keywords that characterize changes in social, economic, and educational conditions across different historical periods without any transcendence of the institutional intercrisis, which leads to a permacrisis. Thus, the historical context allows us to trace the conditions and circumstances that are dynamically intertwined in the cultivation of ideologies, values, and perceptions that affect gender relations and crises.

The research questions are as follows:

1) How has the concept of gender equality altered throughout history?
2) How can permacrisis be understood from a gender perspective?
3) What new theoretical insights can be proposed for the analysis of permacrisis in society and in gender conceptualization?

3 Women's presence through history—intracrisis learning

It is well known that historyoften highlights the dominant groups of society, their power, and their dominance over the weak and oppressed. Gender power has been constructed and transformed throughout history, shaped by specific historical contexts, social conditions, and relationships. Analyzing crises can reveal hidden aspects that are difficult to discern in usual circumstances, as routine situations seem natural and expected and, therefore, go unquestioned.

The history of women's equality is intertwined with the political, economic, and social situations in their country and the world. We can study women as a collective group, rather than as individuals, through the lens of men and their struggles. Additionally, we can detect the pathologies of gender inequality through the economic, social, and political conditions globally and in different countries. Notably, we can see how women have historically been perceived as "the weaker sex" and how this perception has persisted to the present day.

As Meyerowitz (2008) points out, what does not matter is the type of power history produced; rather, what matters is the naturalization of male power through history. The hierarchical power relationship between men and women, as evidenced throughout history, is not differentiated by its origin—whether it was between conqueror and conquered in the Ottoman Empire, between colonizer and colonized, or between ruler and ruled, during the Renaissance or Enlightenment. The critical point is that the advantage of power has always had a male face, regardless of whether women's positions and modes of subordination have changed.

The "Doing Gender" (West and Zimmerman, 1987) argument asserts that gender is continually socially reconstructed through social interaction. Gendered norms and stereotypes occur within a specific sociocultural context shaped by power relations, language norms, and collective identities that define individual roles and identities, producing different forms of oppression and hegemony. The consensus and reproduction of these forms facilitate the maintenance of asymmetrical power relations. In these current times, women continue to be underrepresented in political and sociocultural spheres, and their access to economic decision-making positions remains insufficient.

3.1 Crises and gendered inequality

The 16th and the 20th centuries were characterized by global and regional wars, which granted men dominant positions in society and politics. Crises in various aspects of life, especially

economic, social, and educational aspects, elevated the roles of men within families and societies while extensively devaluing women, who were both exploited and excluded from public life.

During wars and slavery, crises worsened for the conquered, affecting all sectors of economic and social life. Testimonies describe women as transactional objects—bought in exchange for dowries or ravished for masters' pleasure, often isolated in harems (during the Ottoman Empire), confined to designated neighborhoods and houses in Europe, or crowded in slave markets. Inferiority, marginalization, and contempt characterized women's identities. Historically, the custom of dowry existed in different cultures with a long history across Europe, taking various forms such as money and property given by the bride's family to the husband at the time of marriage. In medieval and Renaissance Europe, dowry payments enhanced the power of great families or/and rulers. According to Anderson (2001), dowry payments declined with modernization in Europe but are arising in non-European countries such as India because "*modernization affects dowry payments differently in caste based, compared to wealth-based, societies*" (p. 5). It is also important to note that industrialization was a vehicle for change in wealth-based societies, along with the development of educational, social, and political institutions, which did not occur simultaneously or at the same rate across Europe.

From the 18th to the mid-19th centuries, women on all continents lived in the shadow of men. Their roles as mothers and housewives institutionalized them within the home, with the sole responsibility of raising children and performing housework. Analyzing women's and girls' characteristics and lives reveals oppressive norms established as values. Confined to the house, women's activities were limited to the private realm, governed by men. They had no place in the public sphere of authority, power, and law. Oppressive norms were established as values: women's fidelity and devotion, housekeeping, and unpaid work further differentiated men's and women's roles.

The Seneca Falls Convention (2024), led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, questioned women's societal positions and started changing public mindsets: "Did *I not feel that the time has come for the questions of women's wrongs to be laid before the public? Did I not believe that women herself must do this work, for women alone understand the height, the depth, the breadth of her degradation.*"

From the mid-19th century to the end of the 19th century, education for women became a vehicle for change, though its introduction varied across European countries and the world. New educational laws established primary and secondary schools for girls, gradually increasing the proportion of female graduates compared to male. However, as expected, education as a value did not immediately change the patriarchal mentality, which wanted women and girls at home to be valued by their dowry rather than their education. The crisis revealed conflicting mentalities, as parents hesitated to send their daughters to primary schools and prohibited them from secondary education. Women were forced to obey their fathers, husbands, and brothers in dependency relationships that favored men. Men undertook the most available work and held all power, while women served the family and obeyed men. Obedience, purity, and child-rearing were values defining women's positions.

Apparently, education as a value did not immediately change the patriarchal mentality worldwide, which wanted women and girls at home. As Pyrgos (1995) describes the situation in Cyprus: "*More girls were thus given the opportunity to get educated, but this hardly made any difference to attendance rates as parents opposed or, in the best circumstances, hesitated to send their daughters to primary school. Rather, they made the young girls stay at home and prepare themselves accordingly for their future husbands in terms of dowry but also moral standing in society.*"

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the locked doors of houses started opening. Liberalism as an ideology mainly affected urban women, giving them opportunities to attend secondary schools and a few to study at universities. Education and existing schools rapidly increased. A new phenomenon arose as social and economic changes led several working-class young women (most of them still in their early adolescence) from rural areas to move into the cities to find work as domestic servants in middle- and upper-class households. Economic and social crises once again affected attitudes toward gender; without this change, the economic and social position of women would not have improved.

Institutionalization and women's confinement at home supported patriarchy as the dominant ideology, attributing inferiority and weakness to women even into the 20th century. Significant movements such as the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution for Women's Right to Vote (1920) at the beginning of the century and the 1963 Equal Pay Act highlighted women's fight for equality and focused on patriarchy as a prevailing system of society in which men hold the power and exclude women from equal treatment and rights. Nevertheless, legal amendments have proved insufficient to change the mentality and ethos of the world toward genders.

Did the 20th and 21st centuries lead to a post-crisis era in gender relationships? Contrary to declarations by universal and European organizations, hegemonic masculinity remains prevalent in practice and as the hidden agenda of family, work, and political life. Employment as a means of independence remains slow in all positions, with men preferred over women; reconciling work, private, and family life remains more of a declaration than an application. Economic and pandemic crises affect women the most, as they undertake increasing care services at home. Additionally, as part-timers and in lower positions in organizational hierarchies, women are more likely to lose employment. During crises, the institutionalization and confinement of women rears its head once again. Crises remind us that behind every crisis lies a moral crisis of values, where economic profit and power diminish moral values. In this value system, economic profit at the expense of ethics imbalances the system and results in crises.

Gender, as a system of domination, naturalized power relationships (economic and political), distributing power to men and weakness to women. Based on Connell's assertion that not all men fit into the concept of hegemonic masculinity, one can better understand Scott (1986)'s claim that discussions of legitimated power relationships should focus on gender (socially constructed characteristics of men and women) rather than on biological sex. The meaning of gender illuminates the concept of hegemony as a social and historical construction and downplays and softens the

oppression of women as a social and historical construction, and, as Federicci (2020) claims, as a politically originated labor and housework side effect.

As a result, "gender as a system of power it continues to privilege some men and disadvantages most women" (Davis et al., 2006, p. 2). Thus, intracrisis learning through history leads to the need to re-conceptualize the modern knowledge system: *"If we continue to speak this sameness, if we speak to each other as men have spoken for centuries, as they have taught us to speak, we will fail each other. Again... words will pass through our bodies, above our heads, disappear, make us disappear."* (Vassiliadou, 1997 quoted Luce Lrigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman, translation Gillian, 1985, p. 69).

3.2 Re-conceptualizing the modern knowledge system—the causes of permacrisis

The first step in overcoming the consequences of the modern knowledge system is the recognition that crises do not stem from a single field, whether economic, social, or educational. The causes of the crisis are intersectional and primarily philosophical and ethical (Koutselini, 2010).

In this context, the argument for re-conceptualizing the modern knowledge system is based on the principle that financial, social, and educational crises are surfaces of a deeper ethical crisis, which prioritizes the interests of power holders—upper class and wealth holders, powerful banks, financial enterprises and organizations, hegemonic hierarchies—at the expense of citizens' wellbeing and value-based actions such as gender equality, dignity for all, respect for the environment, health protection, and education for self-actualization. The side effects of contemporary modernity emphasize the measurable results of the market law and further consumption for profit, undermining holistic development and the wellbeing of all citizens, both men and women.

Equality appears to have been reduced to free access to schools for all students and free access to banks for all citizens, without considering people's real needs or the ideologies that differentiate their rights and equality.

Based on the above discussion and Derrida's theory that deconstruction requires circumscribtion, we have proposed the term meta-modernity (Koutselini, 1997, 2006) as the foundation for a new paradigm of communication, schooling, and coexistence in society. Meta-modernity involves updating modernity by overcoming its weaknesses and personalizing its technocratic function and male dominated decision-making processes (Smith and Wexler, 1995).

Foucault describes ethics as a system of moral principles that exist in all communities, promoting rules of contact and development. In the modern world, moral principles have declined, leading to crises that prioritize the few at the expense of the many. In terms of gender equality, the priorities of male hegemony undermine equality.

The argument (i.e., Weedon, 1997) that norms and naturalized stereotypes are reproduced by ideological state systems such as educational mechanisms, the legal system, the mass media,

the employment structure, and the economy advocates for the intersectionality of all sectors of life. These state systems and their intersectionality reproduce gender power relations and behavioral codes that cannot be altered by changing just one system.

From a critical point of view, the term intersectionality should always refer to systems that distribute power to men and reinforce patriarchy. On the contrary, the European Union Gender Equality Index (EIGE, 2023), following Crenshaw (1989), defines intersectionality as situations and traits that, when combined, increase the negative effects on the social and political positions of women and men, and generally, those who are most oppressed in the society. This definition signifies a shift from the concept of patriarchy to a complex coexistence of factors interacting for marginalization. EIGE, for example, recognizes the overlapping forms of discrimination, such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, disability, and other factors.

One can criticize the interlocking of innate traits, such as race, disability, and ethnicity, with acquired characteristics because it is evident that such a view victimizes groups of people *a priori* and simultaneously weakens the focus on social and political factors that marginalize women, such as patriarchy. Patriarchy remains the dominant system in which men hold power, and women are mostly excluded from decision-making positions.

Norms include behavioral assessment and adherence to specific behaviors that reflect the mentality of an era and its people. Behavioral assessments that benefit one group while disadvantaging another illustrate intercrisis, penetrating social, financial, and educational life. The intersectionality of crises affects gender equality by attributing different abilities to different sexes, resulting in weak and hegemonic categories. As Witt (1997) observes, hegemonic genders exercise power and reflect the conditions set by those in positions of societal and political power.

4 Conclusion

The aim of this article was to discuss permacrisis from a gender perspective and to propose new theoretical insights for its analysis. In "Discipline and Punish," Foucault (1979) analyses how societies and cultures punish those who reject their norms, values, and roles of subordination. He argues that culture is the arena where subjects construct their subjectivity by learning what to do, how to behave, and what to believe. "Learning" in a social context is a mechanism of subordination, control, and power, while "disobedience" is a form of resistance to those exerting power over others. The meaning of a reconceptualization action in this article is a form of resistance and disobedience to the side effects of the modern system, which prioritizes finance and material values over moral values such as equality and human dignity.

There are no essential characteristics that determine social gender (gender); there are no predetermined characteristics that include or exclude some individuals. *"Identity categories, such as Women, are not descriptive but always normative and therefore exclusionary"* (Butler, 1991, p. 160).

Intracrisis learning indicates that women remain in the shadow of decision-making roles, often becoming victims of violence and discrimination in all regions of the world, regardless of geography,

culture, or wealth. The workforce and decision-making positions are still male-dominated fields. Political life also remains centered around men. The lack of women's power persists and is related to the concentration of women and men in different sectors (sectoral segregation) (EIGE, 2023).

Vertical segregation still exists, referring to the concentration of men in top positions, such as decision-making positions or other roles of responsibility. One example is the overrepresentation of men as heads of universities, companies, and banks. Inequality persists, which is rooted in a patriarchal mentality and the perception of women as the weaker sex and oppressed gender.

Meta-crisis suggests a shift in how we perceive our relationship with the world. It supports the transcendence of crises in one sector by understanding how deficiencies in one sector affect another in a cyclical movement. This requires immediate changes and supporting counter-movements that balance the results of crises. As shown in history, changes in education have altered gender perceptions, but this is not enough to promote equality. For example, school segregation and the failure to implement the principle of equal pay for equal work have preserved gender hierarchies.

Meta-modernity proposes a dialectic understanding between individuals and social and financial phenomena, empowering people and leading to self-orientation and value-based decisions. The modern system has exaggerated the interests of hegemonic groups at the expense of equality and equity, becoming the source of multiple crises that lead to permacrisis. Gender inequality is both a source and a result of this crisis. The main point of discussion is permacrisis—permanent crisis—which victimizes women through intracrisis, through institutional, educational, economic, and political means, enhancing the negative results of the intersectionality of weaknesses for women all over the world. Intracrisis learning prevents erasing women as a category of analysis in current times.

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