Rethinking Social Innovation: Can Ordinary People Lead to True Transformation?

By

Kawther Ramadan

School of Social Innovation

Saint Paul University

December 16, 2024

Rethinking Social Innovation: Can Ordinary People Lead to True Transformation?

Introduction

In a bustling Cairo neighbourhood, long before the Arab Spring 2011 shook the world, street vendors quietly set up makeshift stalls, claiming corners of public spaces where they had no legal right to be. These vendors, often invisible to official policies, defied oppressive regulations not through protests or grand gestures but by simply existing—by selling their goods, sharing their stories, and staking a claim to their livelihoods. Similarly, women in Tehran, with no formal leadership or manifesto, began loosening their hijabs in defiance of strict dress codes, subtly but powerfully pushing back against state control. These acts may seem small, even ordinary, yet they embody a radical kind of resistance—a quiet encroachment that transforms societies from the ground up.

Such stories highlight the unique ways marginalized groups in the Middle East use everyday defiance to challenge systemic inequities and assert their agency. As Asef Bayat (2013) argues in "Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East," these "nonmovements" are as impactful as organized protests, if not more so, in oppressive contexts where collective dissent is crushed (p.ix). Bayat's lens shifts the focus from conventional Western theories of activism to emphasize informal, decentralized, and often unacknowledged forms of resistance, acts deeply rooted in the lived realities of those navigating authoritarianism, patriarchy, and neoliberalism.

This work also aligns with the research axis of Engaged Pedagogies and Practice of Research, which prioritizes the integration of lived experiences, critical methodologies, and transformative action into scholarly inquiry. My paper engages this axis by foregrounding marginalized voices and exploring how their everyday resistance challenges dominant narratives

of activism and innovation. By embracing engaged pedagogies, this work positions itself not only as an academic critique but as a call to action for inclusive and equitable change.

Additionally, this research draws deeply from the framework of transnational feminism, which critiques the assumption that feminist struggles can be understood solely through a Western lens. Transnational feminism, developed out of postcolonial and women of colour feminisms, rejects the notion of a universal "global sisterhood" that presumes a white, middle-class feminist subject from the Global North as its model (Morgan, 1984). Instead, it advocates for centring the voices and lived realities of women from the Global South, whose experiences of patriarchy, colonialism, and systemic inequity are shaped by unique historical and cultural contexts.

Inspired by these frameworks, I argue that transformative change requires transnational knowledge integrating these non-Western practices and epistemologies into broader discussions of social innovation. Marginalized communities possess the power to reimagine and reshape their societies, not necessarily through grand revolutions, but through everyday actions that subvert, disrupt, and ultimately dismantle systems of oppression. My paper contends that achieving this change demands an epistemological shift grounded in global intersectionality, a critique of capitalism
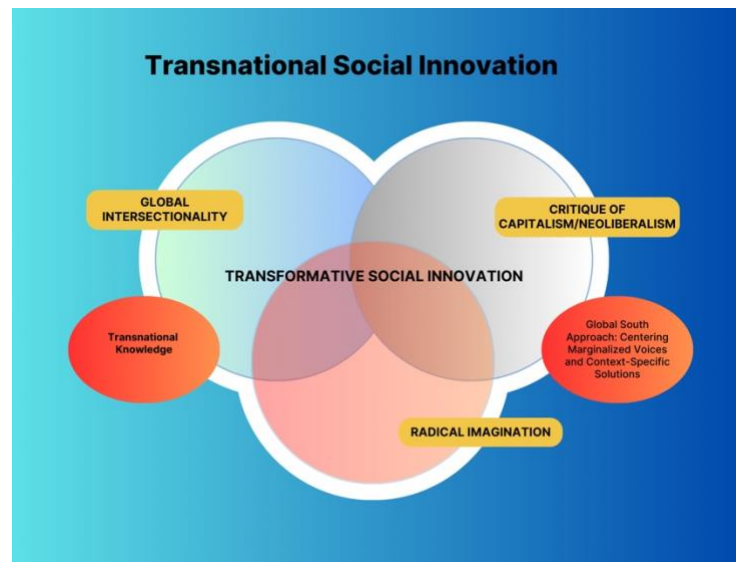

Figure 1Framework for Transnational Social Innovation: Integrating Global Intersectionality, Radical Imagination, and Critiques of Capitalism/Neoliberalism to Center Global South Knowledge and Context-Specific Solutions

and neoliberalism, and the radical imagination necessary to envision alternative futures.

Understanding Social Innovation

I draw on (Mulgan's (2012) definition of social innovation, which describes it as developing new ideas—such as products, services, or models—that address recognized social needs more effectively than existing solutions while fostering new social relationships or collaborations. What resonates with me most in Mulgan's perspective is its dual focus: these innovations not only meet societal needs but also enhance collective capacity for action (p. 22). Unlike interpretations that narrowly distinguish social innovation from technological or material advancements, I see the "social" dimension as encompassing both the process and the ultimate goal of transforming institutions at all levels, from micro to macro (McGowan et al., 2017).

This understanding aligns closely with Nagar & Swarr (2010) framework for transnational feminist studies, which emphasizes the need to remain an "unstable field" that continuously questions its definitions to stay relevant. Like social innovation, transnational feminism focuses on its impact; its methodologies, practices, and transformative potential, rather than static definitions. This dynamic, process-oriented perspective mirrors social innovation's multidimensional framework, which is designed to challenge structural inequities, foster agency, and drive systemic transformation.

Social innovation, as a multidimensional process, fosters inclusion, reconfigures social relationships, and empowers individuals, key components that align seamlessly with my central argument. It underscores that meaningful social innovation must actively confront structural inequities and amplify the agency of marginalized communities. By moving beyond addressing immediate social problems, this framework emphasizes relational and structural transformations, resonating deeply with the epistemological shift I advocate for in this paper.

Rethinking Social Innovation: Can Ordinary People Lead to True Transformation?

Social innovation can be understood through three core components: (a) collaborative actions aimed at fulfilling unaddressed human needs, (b) the reconfiguration of social relationships, and (c) the empowerment of individuals to drive sociopolitical transformation (Moulaert et al., 2013). Social innovation involves "finding progressive solutions for a range of problems including exclusion, deprivation, alienation, and lack of well-being, and to actions that contribute positively to human progress and development. It encompasses fostering inclusion and well-being by improving social relations and empowering communities: imagining and pursuing a world, a nation, a region, a locality, or a community that grants universal rights and is socially inclusive" (Moularet et al., 2013, p.16). For me, this definition highlights the transformative potential of social innovation as a framework for addressing systemic challenges rooted in exclusion and inequity.

What this mean is social innovation is not merely about solving immediate social problems. It is about fostering inclusion and well-being at both individual and societal levels. This requires improving relationships, both between individuals and among social groups, to lay the groundwork for universal rights and inclusivity. Social innovation, when approached in this way, aligns with my broader argument: transformative change necessitates empowering marginalized communities to challenge and reshape entrenched power dynamics while fostering relational and structural transformations.

The scope of social innovation can be categorized into three interconnected levels: "incremental," "institutional," and "disruptive" (Nicholls & Madeleine, 2015). Incremental social innovation focuses on localized changes within existing systems, targeting individual behaviors and attitudes. While this approach improves goods and services to address social needs

effectively, it remains insufficient for systemic transformation. Institutional social innovation, by contrast, shifts the focus to reconfiguring or adapting existing social and economic structures.

The disruptive level, however, offers the greatest transformative potential. Disruptive social innovation targets systemic change by challenging entrenched power relations, addressing structural inequalities, and redefining societal frameworks. It involves large-scale social movements such as the Youth Climate Movement, the Green New Deal, and the Yellow Vest Movement in France (Wilson, 2024). These movements aim not merely for reform but for dismantling hierarchies and constructing new systems of governance and social organization. These examples demonstrate how disruptive innovation can fundamentally alter structures that perpetuate inequality, making it essential to my argument that social innovation must actively confront structural inequities.

The Promise of Social Innovation

Building on the previous section's exploration of the concept of social innovation, I see its unique promise in addressing complex and deeply rooted inequities through its multidimensional nature. Social innovation integrates material, cultural, social, and political dimensions, adapting to the specific historical, cultural, and political contexts in which it operates (Chateauvert et al., 2024). From grassroots initiatives to global movements, social innovation offers a flexible yet powerful tool for systemic change. At its core, it emphasizes inclusion, well-being, and the dismantling of systems that perpetuate social exclusion. Social innovation seeks not only to address immediate challenges but also to establish equitable systems and relationships for a more just world. Central to this promise is the recognition of power relations, structures of domination, and the need to unite critical thinking, creativity, and

collective action. It is vital to expand the discourse beyond the North American context and actively include the voices of the Global South in research and practice.

A key framework that I find particularly valuable for conceptualizing and implementing transformative initiatives in social innovation is the "Four 'R' Strategies for Systemic Change," as outlined by Wright (2010). This framework encompasses four distinct yet interconnected approaches. The first, resilience, focuses on building the capacity of individuals and communities to adapt and thrive by fostering alternative systems of production and exchange that transcend traditional frameworks. The second, resistance, emphasizes the importance of collective action and advocacy to confront injustices, challenge harmful systems, and spark critical conversations that drive sustained efforts for change.

The third strategy, reform, advocates for gradual but meaningful policy changes and institutional transformations, ensuring that these align with principles of justice and equity. Finally, rupture calls for a more radical approach, involving the complete dismantling of flawed systems and the construction of entirely new and equitable structures. These strategies provide a comprehensive roadmap for addressing systemic inequities while recognizing the complexity and specificity of social contexts. Each of these strategies acknowledges the complexity and specificity of social contexts, emphasizing the need for adaptive approaches tailored to unique challenges (Wright, 2010, p.211).

In light of these insights, I argue that social innovation must be understood as a proactive and dynamic process that empowers marginalized communities. However, achieving genuine transformation requires more than incremental adjustments, it necessitates addressing the structural inequities underpinning social exclusion. Central to this effort is an epistemological

shift, which demands reimagining the frameworks through which we approach and solve social challenges.

I propose rethinking the transformative potential of social innovation through the lens of transnational feminism, which defies rigid categorization and instead functions as a methodology that critiques power, centers marginalized voices and crosses disciplinary boundaries. Its broad applications span the social sciences, humanities, and cultural studies, often intersecting with related frameworks such as postcolonial feminism, third-world feminism, and women of colour feminism. This plurality underscores that transnational feminist theorizing is not limited to a single definition but is instead an evolving practice. It challenges traditional feminist paradigms while opening new pathways for understanding and transformative action. By incorporating transnational feminist methodologies into social innovation, we can create frameworks that are more inclusive, equitable, and reflective of diverse lived experiences, ensuring that transformative change is both systemic and enduring.

Transnational Social Innovation: Centering Global South Voices

In 2017, on a Tehran street, Vida Movahed silently waved her white headscarf on a stick—a simple yet profound act of defiance against Iran's compulsory hijab laws. This single gesture ignited a wave of civil disobedience, as women across the country began removing their hijabs in public, transforming a personal act into a collective symbol of resistance. Their fight transcended dress codes, challenging systemic inequality and authoritarian control. Despite facing arrest, violence, and imprisonment, Iranian women have persisted in their quest for freedom, sparking a global movement of solidarity and hope (CBC, 2018).

What makes movements like this so compelling is their ability to transcend borders, connecting grassroots struggles with global conversations about justice. Iranian women

leveraged social media and digital activism to amplify their voices and engage feminist movements worldwide, showcasing the transnational potential of grassroots resistance. Their story underscores how centering voices from the Global South is essential for reimagining social innovation. By prioritizing these lived experiences, we can create solutions that are inclusive, equitable, and reflective of the realities of those most affected by systemic injustice.

Figure 2Vida Movahed, known as the "Girl of Enghelab Street" in Tahran-Iran in 2017. Source: CBC Radio

Similarly, in Egypt, the 7am Movement provides another example of grassroots resistance with global implications. In November 2013, 21 young women, barely out of their teens, gathered in Alexandria to protest the military coup that ousted former president Mohamed Morsy. Armed with nothing more than handwritten flyers and their unwavering conviction, these women took to the streets to demand justice. Their peaceful demonstrations were met with severe repression: 14 members were sentenced to 11 years in prison, including minors sent to juvenile detention centers. While the movement could not sustain its activism under Egypt's authoritarian

crackdown, their courage and determination remain etched in memory, a testament to the

enduring power of localized struggles for justice (France 24, 2013).

Figure 3Young women members of the 7am Movement stand behind bars in Alexandria-Egypt. Source: Mada Masr

The stories of these movements illustrate the transnational potential of social innovation,

particularly when viewed through the lens of transnational feminism. They echo Asef Bayat's

(2010) concept of "the quiet encroachment of the ordinary," which emphasizes how everyday

acts of defiance challenge systemic inequities without relying on formal leadership or structured

organizations. These localized struggles resonate far beyond their immediate contexts,

contributing to broader conversations about equity, power, and resistance.

However, the transformative potential of transnational social innovation faces significant

obstacles, particularly in what Banerjee et al. (2020)calls "abyssal thinking." This term describes

how dominant Northern perspectives create artificial divides between what is considered "true

knowledge" and everything else, relegating alternative knowledge systems, especially those from

the Global South to the realm of subjective or invalid understandings (p.7). This epistemological hierarchy privileges Western science as the sole arbiter of truth, dismissing Indigenous and localized forms of knowledge. For social innovation to achieve its promise, it must actively confront and dismantle these entrenched biases.

Transnational feminism offers a critical lens to address these power imbalances and decolonize the practice of social innovation. It teaches that solidarity is not about erasing differences but about working through them to build collective action across diverse locations and experiences (Caouette et al., 2010). This approach emphasizes mutual accountability, shared struggles, and the importance of localized knowledge systems, making it particularly relevant for the goals of social innovation.

Historically, the Global North has dominated narratives of social change, often marginalizing the strategies and insights of the Global South. Yet, as Caouette et al (2010) argue, some of the most radical transformations have emerged from the Global South, where communities have navigated colonial legacies, systemic poverty, and cultural marginalization with remarkable resilience and ingenuity. By integrating these perspectives, social innovation can move beyond replicating colonial patterns of knowledge production and instead foster genuinely inclusive and equitable frameworks for change.

Abyssal thinking reminds us that dominant knowledge systems not only exclude but actively undermine the legitimacy of alternative epistemologies. Feminist movements in the Global South demonstrate how these marginalized knowledge systems can reshape global discourses. Whether addressing environmental justice in Latin America or advocating for women's rights in Southeast Asia, these movements highlight the value of local knowledge in

challenging oppressive systems and contributing to global conversations about justice and equity(Caouette et al., 2010).

To unlock the full potential of transnational social innovation, we must move beyond tokenism to genuine collaboration. This involves creating platforms where marginalized communities are not just participants but leaders in shaping both the problems being addressed and the solutions being implemented. It also requires critically examining global capitalism and neoliberalism, which perpetuate many of the systemic injustices that social innovation seeks to dismantle. Finally, it demands the courage to imagine alternative futures, what (Khasnabish, 2020) calls "radical imagination", that challenge entrenched norms and offer transformative pathways to justice.

Ultimately, transnational social innovation is not merely about expanding its geographical scope; it is about deepening its commitment to equity and inclusivity. By embracing transnational feminism and rejecting epistemological hierarchies, we can ensure that social innovation reflects the diversity of global experiences while empowering those historically excluded from decision-making processes. This approach strengthens social change movements across borders and fosters solutions that flow dynamically between local and global levels. Incorporating diverse perspectives, especially from the Global South, allows social innovation to fulfill its transformative promise of inclusivity and justice.

A critical part of this transformative shift is embracing global intersectionality, which reveals how multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantage intersect across diverse societies and cultures (Cho et al., 2013). This perspective is indispensable for uncovering the complex layers of systemic inequities that shape marginalized experiences globally. Equally vital is the need to critically examine global capitalism and neoliberalism, as these systems often amplify

structural injustices and reinforce existing power imbalances (Wright, 2010). Addressing these systems allows us to tackle the root causes of inequality rather than merely treating their symptoms (Fraser, 2022).

Beyond critique, the transformative potential of radical imagination becomes essential. Radical imagination challenges us to envision alternative futures and create new geopolitical knowledge systems that break free from entrenched norms (Khasnabish, 2020). This process fosters the development of equitable systems that are not simply extensions of existing frameworks but represent a fundamental rethinking of social, political, and economic paradigms. In the following section, I delve into global intersectionality as a foundational element of this reimagined framework, emphasizing its importance in addressing systemic oppression and fostering inclusive, transformative change.

Global Intersectionality as an analytical framework

As I engage with the concept of global intersectionality, I see it as an essential extension of intersectionality that situates overlapping and intersecting social identities, such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity, within a global context Crenshaw (1989); hooks, (2008). This framework challenges me to think beyond local or national boundaries and to consider how power dynamics, marginalization, and privilege operate across transnational systems, histories, and structures (Mohanty, 1988). I recognize that global phenomena like colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and migration not only shape but often exacerbate local inequalities (Said, 1978). For example, rural communities in the Global South face compounded vulnerabilities due to the intersections of class, race, and gender—intersections that are deeply shaped by global economic policies and colonial legacies (Banerjee et al., 2020).

Rethinking Social Innovation: Can Ordinary People Lead to True Transformation?

Global intersectionality allows me to analyze the power structures that shape both individual and collective experiences. It encourages me to move beyond a narrow focus on identity categories and instead examine how social, political, and economic forces maintain inequalities across national borders (Cho et al., 2013). Through this lens, I understand how colonization and its enduring legacies continue to shape today's power dynamics and inequities (Coulthard, 2014). Recognizing these historical and ongoing effects is crucial to understanding the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression (Banerjee et al., 2023).

I also see global intersectionality as a way to center the voices and experiences of those most marginalized by these intersecting forms of oppression (Su, 2017). By prioritizing perspectives that are often excluded from dominant narratives, global intersectionality challenges existing power structures and creates opportunities for more equitable systems (Hossein, 2019) (Hossein, 2019). For instance, the idea of a "Black social economy" highlights the importance of analyzing the unique historical experiences and challenges faced by Black individuals and communities in economic systems (Hossein, 2019, p. 214). It is through this understanding—of how racism and economic exploitation intersect—that we can begin to develop effective solutions and promote social justice within the social economy.

Another aspect of global intersectionality that resonates with me is how it examines the intersection of patriarchal norms and settler colonialism in shaping the experiences of Indigenous women (Coulthard & Alfred, 2014). Feminist analyses of Indigenous movements emphasize the importance of addressing gender dynamics and challenging patriarchal structures within broader decolonization efforts. To me, this demonstrates the power of global intersectionality to tackle the complex interplay of multiple forms of oppression that transcend national boundaries.

Rethinking Social Innovation: Can Ordinary People Lead to True Transformation?

As I reflect on how colonialism, imperialism, and migration contribute to structural inequities, I am drawn to Coulthard's (2014) explanation of settler colonialism as a system driven by the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands and self-determining authority. This dispossession, motivated by the desire for access to territory and resources, has created structural inequities that persist today. The historical and ongoing displacement of Indigenous populations through spatial practices, such as zoning laws and forced relocations, continues to marginalize these communities and limit their access to resources and opportunities (Coulthard, 2014, p. 174). These inequities are a stark reminder of how power imbalances embedded in systems like colonialism and capitalism affect not just individuals but entire social innovation initiatives aimed at addressing inequities.

I see the dominance of market-centered approaches as a particular challenge for social innovation. Market-based solutions often fail to address the structural and historical factors underlying social problems, instead reinforcing existing power structures and perpetuating inequalities. For example, the focus on "scaling for impact" can prioritize organizational growth over the needs of communities, leading to initiatives that are more concerned with profit than with meaningful social justice (Banerjee et al., 2020).

To overcome these challenges, I align with Banerjee's (2020) argument that a "politics of practice" is crucial for addressing power imbalances in social innovation. This requires acknowledging that all spaces of participation are shaped by power relations and designing initiatives to actively challenge these dynamics. It also involves recognizing and mitigating the biases researchers, policymakers, and practitioners bring to their work (Banerjee, 2020, p. 9).

Ultimately, I believe that social innovation must undergo an epistemological shift grounded in global intersectionality. Without acknowledging and challenging the structural roots

of oppression, social innovation risks reproducing the very systems it seeks to transform. Banerjee et al. (2023) advocate for social innovation that begins with the ontological and epistemological perspectives of marginalized communities, emphasizing the concept of "cognitive justice." This perspective resonates deeply with me, particularly the idea that "there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice" (Banerjee, 2023, p. 2). To achieve true global social justice—where all individuals and communities have equitable access to opportunities and resources—we must value and incorporate diverse ways of knowing and being.

Global intersectionality, when paired with frameworks like Critical Race Theory (CRT), further demonstrates the potential of participatory processes to disrupt entrenched hierarchies and challenge systemic inequalities. Su (2017) critiques liberal discourses of neutrality and colorblindness for perpetuating racial inequalities and emphasizes the need to prioritize the voices of marginalized communities in any effort to address racial injustice. This reinforces my belief that inclusive social innovation must acknowledge and actively challenge systems of power.

For me, global intersectionality is more than just an analytical framework, like transnational social innovation, it is a call to action. It compels us to reimagine how we approach social justice, ensuring that our efforts reflect the diverse realities of those most affected by systemic inequities. However, addressing these inequities also requires confronting the economic systems that often sustain and exacerbate them. The next section delves into the critique of capitalism and neoliberalism, examining how these structures perpetuate injustice and exploring how social innovation can challenge and reimagine them to foster truly transformative change.

Critique of Capitalism and Neoliberalism

Rethinking Social Innovation: Can Ordinary People Lead to True Transformation?

Building on the discussion of global intersectionality, which emphasizes the interconnected oppressions within global systems, it becomes clear that capitalism and neoliberalism are foundational structures perpetuating these inequities. To achieve transformative change through social innovation, it is essential to confront these systems, which prioritize profit and individualism over collective well-being and the agency of marginalized communities. Neoliberalism, with its focus on individualism, directly conflicts with the principles of global intersectionality, which underscore relational identities and the shared nature of oppression. This tension highlights the limitations of neoliberal frameworks in addressing systemic inequities (Fraser, 2022).

Neoliberalism reduces citizens to consumers, reshaping societal relations into market transactions and obscuring the collective struggles necessary for equitable change (Peck & Tickell, 2002). Fraser (2022) critiques neoliberalism as a "cannibalistic system" that sustains itself through relentless exploitation, eroding the social fabric it claims to enhance. Similarly, Farrell (2015) critiques "conscience capitalism," a neoliberal mechanism that rebrands market-driven policies as morally responsible while neglecting the root causes of systemic oppression. This framework commodifies social and environmental justice, transforming them into marketable goods and reinforcing the power structures it claims to reform.

Capitalism, as a system grounded in unregulated economic growth, exacerbates rather than alleviates poverty. While economic expansion may generate social wealth, Ciancanelli & Fasenfest (2017)argue that capitalism's inherent inequality ensures this wealth remains unevenly distributed. Technological advancements and the pursuit of cheaper labour continually render large segments of the population "surplus to the system's production requirements" (p. 43). This dynamic is not geographically constrained; it is evident globally, from Detroit's

deindustrialization to rural Argentina's economic decline, as supply chains shift, leaving local communities in deepened poverty and precarity.

The commodification of land and labour is central to capitalism's exploitation of marginalized communities. Ciancanelli & Fasenfest (2017) notes how global capitalism enforces violent land commodification under narratives that obscure the systemic violence involved. This is particularly evident in colonial and post-colonial economies, where Indigenous populations and rural communities have been displaced and disenfranchised. (Wright, 2018) further critiques capitalism's competitive markets for perpetuating class exploitation and economic inequality, disproportionately affecting immigrant and racialized workers. These groups often face cycles of poverty and precarity, reflecting capitalism's failure to prioritize human well-being over profit. Both capitalism and neoliberalism embed systemic inequities within their structures, obstructing transformative social innovation. Luxenburg (2008) warns that incremental reforms within capitalist systems often institutionalize class antagonisms, making revolutionary change increasingly tricky. McBay (2019) echoes this critique, arguing that neoliberalism creates "structures of resistance" that fragment communities and promote individual solutions to collective problems. This fragmentation undermines the radical restructuring of power and resources necessary for equitable transformation.

The transnationalization of feminist movements offers a critical lens for addressing the systemic inequities perpetuated by capitalism and neoliberalism. These movements exemplify how grassroots efforts, deeply connected to local realities, can challenge global structures of oppression. As Caouette et al., 2010) argue, transnationalization must go beyond token representation or engagement with a select group of experts. Instead, it requires active collaboration with and leadership from those directly affected by systemic injustices. This

approach builds connections between local and global struggles, fostering transnational solidarity and ensuring that pathways for change flow in both directions.

The transnationalization of solidarity counters the "no alternative" narrative often perpetuated by global institutions, which use neoliberal frameworks to frame market-driven solutions as inevitable or universal. By emphasizing shared experiences and mutual learning among feminist movements across nations, transnational feminism creates a powerful counter-narrative that prioritizes collective agency over individualism. This approach not only strengthens feminist movements but also offers a blueprint for reimagining social innovation as a participatory and inclusive process (p. viii).

Confronting these systemic economic structures is crucial for empowering marginalized communities and achieving meaningful social innovation. Transformative change requires moving beyond market-driven solutions to embrace alternative frameworks that prioritize collective well-being and cognitive justice (Ciancanelli, 2017; Wright, 2018). This involves addressing the symptoms of inequality and the power dynamics and institutional structures that sustain it (Peck & Tickell, 2002).

Challenging the dominance of neoliberal market logic demands the promotion of alternative economic models and the democratization of global institutions like the IMF and WTO, which often enforce policies that exacerbate social and environmental harm. Building translocal political solidarity is vital to countering the globalization of neoliberalism, yet these efforts must overcome the fragmentation and competition fostered by neoliberal systems.

Ultimately, capitalism and neoliberalism perpetuate structural inequities through their prioritization of individualism, commodification, and profit. These systems exploit marginalized communities and obstruct transformative change, reinforcing the urgency of radical approaches

to social innovation. True transformation requires rethinking the economic and political structures that sustain global inequalities and embracing systems that center equity, collective action, and well-being. The next section explores the role of radical imagination, examining how it empowers us to envision and construct transformative futures that transcend the limitations of existing economic and social systems.

Radical Imagination as a Tool for Transformative Change

Expanding on the critique of capitalism and neoliberalism, which perpetuate systemic inequities and undermine collective agency, the concept of *radical imagination* offers a powerful framework for envisioning and implementing transformative change. As Khasnabish (2019) argues, radical imagination is the collective capacity to envision the world as it could be—a process shaped through people, ideas, and contexts. This dynamic activity animates social movements by offering alternative visions of justice and equity while dismantling structural oppression.

Radical imagination challenges dominant systems by fostering pluralistic approaches that empower marginalized communities to articulate and pursue equitable futures. Khasnabish (2020) describe it as a lived, material process expressed through creative practices such as art, music, and political action. It thrives in dialogic spaces where communities collectively map "what is," narrate "what was," and speculate on "what might be," building solidarity and nurturing resistance to entrenched norms.

This vision aligns closely with (De Sousa, 2008) advocacy for "opening up the canon of knowledge" by valuing non-Western epistemologies. They critique the epistemological foundationalism of the global North, which has historically marginalized Indigenous and local knowledge systems, and instead champion epistemological pluralism. Recognizing diverse

knowledge systems is essential for crafting inclusive and contextually relevant responses to global challenges.

Case studies highlighted by Banerjee et al. (2023) further illustrate the transformative potential of radical imagination in rural contexts. The Dignity and Design (D&D) initiative in rural India exemplifies how social innovation can dismantle entrenched caste and gender hierarchies. Women previously engaged in manual scavenging—a caste-based and gendered practice of collecting human waste—collectively reclaimed their dignity and livelihoods by manufacturing and selling ethnic garments. This grassroots, bottom-up approach worked to deinstitutionalize oppressive structures while reinstitutionalizing participation, empowerment, and human rights. D&D demonstrates how solidarity and agency can reimagine societal norms and foster transformative change.

Similarly, the Terra Vista Settlement in Southern Bahia, Brazil, highlights how radical imagination drives environmental and social transformation. Established in 1992 by the Landless Workers Movement, this settlement integrates agroecological principles with food sovereignty and community resilience. Its achievements include restoring 92% of riparian buffers and 80% of springs, showcasing a sustainable agricultural model aligned with social and environmental justice. Through the Network of Peoples, Terra Vista fosters horizontal solidarities among rural and urban communities, challenging the commodification of agriculture tied to capitalist markets. This case study highlights the importance of intertwining social, environmental, and economic dimensions to prioritize sovereignty and sustainability.

Both examples underscore how radical imagination serves as a foundation for social innovation, enabling marginalized communities to envision and construct alternative futures.

These initiatives disrupt entrenched systems of oppression, fostering empowerment through the integration of social, environmental, and political dimensions into transformative practices.

The transformative potential of radical imagination also complements the principles of transnational social innovation. Just as transnational feminism critiques the dominance of Western-centric models and centers marginalized voices, radical imagination counters the commodification and alienation perpetuated by capitalist systems. French et al., (2022) argue for adaptive, non-linear approaches grounded in complexity theory that align with this vision, emphasizing the value of diverse ways of knowing, particularly those rooted in marginalized communities.

Fraser (2022) further underscores the critical role of radical imagination in rethinking global systems and addressing intersecting crises like climate change, systemic inequality, and exploitation. She critiques the limitations of existing hegemonic frameworks and highlights the need for new epistemologies rooted in equity and justice. This aligns with Khasnabish's (2019) assertion that radical imagination thrives in collective spaces, fostering solidarity and creative resistance against neoliberal ideologies.

Radical imagination disrupts the dominance of Western-centric systems and creates opportunities for systemic transformation. By enabling marginalized communities to envision alternative geopolitical futures, it challenges entrenched hierarchies and fosters collective agency, making it an indispensable tool for advancing social innovation and justice. Integrating radical imagination into transnational social innovation bridges critiques of capitalism and neoliberalism with actionable frameworks for equity, sustainability, and inclusivity.

As this section concludes, it is evident that radical imagination is not a guarantee of revolution but a vital ingredient for envisioning and enacting transformative change. By

cultivating spaces for collective dreaming and dialogue, radical imagination empowers marginalized communities to resist oppressive systems and construct new paradigms rooted in justice, equity, and collective well-being.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that achieving transformative social innovation requires an epistemological shift rooted in global intersectionality, a critical examination of capitalism and neoliberalism, and the radical imagination necessary to envision alternative futures. These three interconnected frameworks form the foundation of an approach that centers marginalized voices and challenges entrenched systems of oppression.

Social innovation, as defined in this paper, is a multidimensional process that not only addresses immediate social needs but also fosters inclusion, reconfigures social relationships, and empowers individuals to drive systemic transformation. By integrating material, cultural, social, and political dimensions, social innovation holds the promise of reshaping institutions to create equitable systems and relationships. This foundational definition sets the stage for understanding the profound potential of social innovation to challenge entrenched power dynamics and foster collective agency.

The transnational potential of social innovation underscores the importance of centering voices from the Global South. Movements like Iran's hijab protests and Egypt's 7am Movement reveal how localized struggles can resonate globally, fostering solidarity and amplifying marginalized perspectives. These examples demonstrate that transnational social innovation is not simply about expanding geographical reach but about bridging local and global efforts to create inclusive, contextually relevant solutions. By challenging epistemological hierarchies, as

described through the lens of transnational feminism, social innovation can move beyond the dominance of Western-centric frameworks and embrace the plurality of knowledge systems.

Building on this, global intersectionality reveals how overlapping forms of discrimination operate across local and transnational contexts, emphasizing the need for solutions that address systemic inequities holistically. By focusing on the lived realities of those most affected by oppression, global intersectionality ensures that social innovation is inclusive, equitable, and responsive to diverse experiences.

The critique of capitalism and neoliberalism underscores how these economic systems perpetuate inequality through their prioritization of profit and commodification over collective well-being. Confronting these systems is essential to dismantling the structures that sustain global inequities and to advancing an alternative model of social innovation grounded in solidarity and cognitive justice.

Finally, radical imagination provides the creative and collective capacity to reimagine the world as it could be. It challenges hegemonic norms and fosters community-driven visions of justice, equity, and sustainability. This dynamic framework connects critiques of structural oppression with actionable pathways for systemic transformation, demonstrating the power of imagination in reshaping the social, economic, and political paradigms that govern our lives.

These frameworks, global intersectionality, the critique of capitalism and neoliberalism, and radical imagination, illustrate that transformative social innovation is not merely a process of incremental reform. It requires rethinking the very structures that sustain injustice and engaging the voices and knowledge systems of marginalized communities. These approaches, social innovation can serve as a powerful tool for fostering equity, collective action, and a shared vision of a more just and inclusive world.

References

Banerjee, S., Carney, S., & Hulgård, L. (2020). People-Centered Social Innovation: An Emerging Paradigm with Global Potential. In *People-Centered Social Innovation* (pp. 1–16).

Banerjee, S., Lucas dos Santos, L., & Hulgård, L. (2023). Intersectional knowledge as rural social innovation. *Journal of Rural Studies*.

Bayat, A. (2013). *Life as politics: How ordinary people change the Middle East*. tanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press.

Caouette, D., Masson, D., & Dufour, P. (2010). *Solidarities beyond borders: Transnationalizing women's movements*. Vancouver : UBC Press.

CBC. (2018). *Iranian women risk arrest as they remove their veils for #WhiteWednesdays*. https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-january-31-2018-1.4510938/iranian-women-risk-arrest-as-they-remove-their-veils-for-whitewednesdays-1.4510942

Chateauvert, J., Dufort, P., & Gunter, C. (2024). *Social Innovation for Real World Transformation: Roadmaps for Changing the World*.

Cho, S., Crenshaw, K., & McCall, L. (2013). *Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis*.

Ciancanelli, P., & Fasenfest, D. (2017). *Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre on the brink*. Towards just and sustainable economies.

Coulthard, G. S., & Alfred, T. (2014). *Red skin, white masks: Rejecting the colonial politics of recognition*.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics [1989]. In *Feminist Legal Theory: Readings in Law and Gender*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429500480

De Sousa, S. (2008). Introduction: Opening Up the Canon of Knowledge and Recognition of Difference. Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies. In *Nunes and Menesses Introduction* (p. Pp. Xix-ixii).

Farrell, N. (2015). Conscience Capitalism' and the Neoliberalisation of the Non-Profit Sector. *New Political Economy*.

France 24. (2013). *Egyptian women jailed for pro-Morsi protest*. https://www.france24.com/en/20131129-egypt-jail-girls-7am-sentence-arrest-fattah

Fraser, N. (2022). *Cannibal capitalism: How our system is devouring democracy, care, and the planet—And what we can do about it*. London ; New York : Verso.

French, M., McGowan, K., Rhodes, M. L., & Zivkovic, S. (2022). Guest editorial: Complexity as a model for social innovation and social entrepreneurship: Is there order in the chaos? *Social Enterprise Journal*.

Hooks, B. (2008). Belonging: A Culture of Place. In *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203888018

Hossein, C. S. (2019). A Black Epistemology for the Social and Solidarity Economy: The Black Social Economy. *The Review of Black Political Economy*.

Khasnabish, A. (2020). *Ecologies of the radical imagination*. Information, communication & society.

Luxenburg, R. (2008). *Reform or Revolution*. Haymarket Books.

McBay, A. (2019). *Full spectrum resistance*. New York : Seven Stories Press.

McGowan, K., Westley, F., & Tjörnbo, O. (2017). The history of social innovation. In *The Evolution of Social Innovation* (pp. 1–17). United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. In *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003135593-13

Morgan, R. (1984). *Sisterhood is global: The international women's movement anthology*. https://ocul-

Moulaert, F., MacCallum, D., & Hillier, J. (2013). Social innovation: Intuition, precept, concept, theory and practice. In *The International Handbook on Social Innovation* (pp. 13–24).

Mulgan, G. (2012). *Social Innovation Theories: Can Theory Catch Up with Practice?* (pp. 19–42). Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg.

Nagar, R., & Swarr, A. L. (2010). *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*. State University of New York Press.

Nicholls, A., & Madeleine, G. (2015). Introduction: Dimensions of Social Innovation. In *New Frontiers in Social Innovation Research*.

Peck, J., & Tickell, A. (2002). Neoliberalizing Space. *Antipode*.

Said, E. W. (1978). Said—Orientalism, Introduction.pdf. In *Orientalism*.

Su, C. (2017). Beyond Inclusion: Critical Race Theory and Participatory Budgeting. *New Political Science*.

Wilson, A. (2024). *INS 8101 Social Innovation Issues and Theories I (Week2)*.

Wright, E. O. (2010). *Envisioning real utopias*. London ; New York : Verso.

Wright, E. O. (2018). *Varieties of Anti-Capitalism. How to be an Anti-capitalist for the 21st Century*.