

'TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE'

**GENDER CONCERNS AND STRATEGIES
IN
THE RESISTANCE
TO
IMPERIALIST GLOBALISATION**

Brinda Karat

AN **AIDWA** PUBLICATION

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It is well known and documented across the globe that working class women and women of the working poor in rural areas have been the worst victims of neo-liberal policies and imperialist globalisation. It is not as though working men have gained at the expense of women. Debates on the feminisation of poverty must be situated within the reality of the main feature of globalisation, namely increasing inequalities, between the rich and the poor between and within nations. Within a general deterioration of the livelihood and living standards of the working people, women have been more affected.

In the social sphere the all pervasive market based cultures have tended to further the commodification of women's bodies. In social life, violence against women has increased. Globally, the most shocking trend is the huge increase in the trafficking of women both for labour and as objects of sexual exploitation. Indeed trafficking constitutes one of the fastest growing "industries" in the world.

GLOBAL TRENDS

Capturing Gender Inequality Globally

The reality of gender injustice can be captured in different ways. One such measurement is the Gender Gap Index that has been developed by the World Economic Forum. It looks at four indicators, viz. economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. In the most recent index for 2012, India ranks in the bottom quarter at 105 out of 135 countries surveyed. This shameful record is also heightened by the fact that India is last among the BRICS countries with South Africa ranked at 16, Russia at 59, Brazil at 62 and China at 69. Significantly, gender equality in Socialist Cuba takes it to first place among the Latin American countries and puts it among the top twenty countries in the world, ranked at 19.

According to the Index no country has closed the gender gap in these four spheres. Even the best performing Nordic countries have a 15 point gap. These are the countries which till recently maintained a strong social welfare system with an explicit emphasis on gender equality. All the major G-7 countries who preach to the world about democracy fare poorly, with the gender gap in the US as high as 27, UK and Germany about the same and France 31. While many countries have made remarkable advances in education by increasing equal access to boys and girls, men and women, their record in health and survival is poor.

In the political sphere, India does much better because of the reservations for women in local self-government bodies and has a high ranking of 17. But in most of those countries where the gender gap is relatively higher, the most revealing record is of the inequality between men and women in terms of employment opportunities and wages. At the same time it does show that countries like China, which historically have had high degrees of gender inequality, have been able to address the issues more successfully, unlike India.

While there may be weaknesses in the method of computation, almost all gender indices, including the one developed by Human Development Report of the United Nations point to the prevalence and resilience of patriarchal notions and practices

leading to gross gender discrimination. This is also reflected in the continuing gender based segregation in employment across the world, including in developed countries. If economic independence is a prerequisite for women's advance and emancipation, then the present pattern of globalisation has been shown in its working in the last two decades, to produce quite the opposite results for the majority of the world's women.

Who Pays the Cost of the Global Financial Crisis?

As revealed through the reports of different international agencies, the impact of the global financial crisis on women has been particularly severe, pushing them more and more into poverty, malnourishment, hunger and joblessness.

The crisis had its roots in the increased power of global finance capital and a deregulated global regime spanning trans-national boundaries, therefore escaping any kind of discipline by any single nation state, which allowed rampant speculation. With the backing of Governments of imperialist powers, nations, institutions, and people were suborned in the drive for profit maximization. It showed the inevitable reality of the unsustainability of the trajectory of imperialist globalisation. Moreover, those companies, banks and individuals who were responsible for the crisis in the first place were given huge bailouts by global financial institutions and Governments. In essence, the dubious risks and unethical decisions were underwritten by central banks.

In the US alone, the prime mover of the crisis, over 12 trillion dollars were given in various ways to save the corporates and banks. According to a survey of 77 countries by the World Bank and the ILO, of the *additional* fiscal spending of 2.4 trillion dollars (in the wake of the financial crisis), as much as 66% went to the financial sector while just 8% was spent on health and 5% each on infrastructure and education.

In fact the austerity measures being pushed on to the world are in sharp contrast to the generosity shown to the criminals responsible for the ruination of millions of families - what the US Occupy Wall Street movement described as *“the 1% against the 99%”*.

Germany: Cuts in social security measures and withdrawal of protective legislations for workers
France: Cuts in public pensions, health care
Italy: Freeze on labour recruitment, cuts in public sector wages, health and education spending
40 countries have altered their “employment protection regulations for permanent employees by modifying severance payments and notice periods”; in common parlance these countries have implemented a hire and fire policy.
25 countries have “modified legislation on collective dismissal for economic reasons”, namely the right to dismiss and close down without any compensation for the workers.

Although such austerity measures affect all working people, they have a differential impact on women.

Growing Unemployment

In 90% of the countries that have implemented austerity measures, the rates of unemployment are higher than they were in 2007, and steadily increasing. However, in the crisis affected countries, the first round of layoffs and closures were in the financial sector, which was affected the most. Since women are highly under-represented in employment in these sectors, more men lost jobs than women, mainly because of the segregation of male and female employment in different sectors.

The existence of a reserve army of unemployed labour increases the vulnerability of workers and gives an advantage to capital over labour. According to recent estimates, of the 3.3 billion strong work force in the world, 202 million were unemployed at the end of 2012. Since the crisis, 55 million jobs “are missing” and the ILO reports that these numbers are rising. In particular, unemployment among youth has reached unprecedented levels. Global youth unemployment stood at 12.6%, with an increasing rate among young people between 16-17% in developed economies and the European Union region. In countries where employment growth has resumed, the jobs are increasingly short term, involuntarily part - time and temporary.

A shocking global picture that emerges is a strong indictment of the capitalist system. More than 50% of those who have employment are in what is described as “vulnerable employment.” In other words, an estimated 1.52 billion workers at the beginning of 2013 were in jobs with no guaranteed minimum wage, security of service, dearness allowance, bonus, provident fund, or any social security. Women’s employment has been particularly affected by the crisis. The UN Women Report estimates that among these “vulnerable” workers, 56% are women. The export oriented segments of developing countries have also been badly hit because of cancellation of orders in the wake of the crisis. The UNIFEM estimated that women comprise 60-80% of workers in export manufacturing industries in developing countries. On the one hand the present framework of globalisation has led to high rates of unemployment and underemployment described as ‘job-loss’ growth across the world, and on the other, this huge reserve army of the unemployed and job seekers enables global capital to further push wages down. Here we see the how the Marxist theory of capital accumulation through the unending supply of cheap labour - with a strong female contingent - operates in the globalised world; it keeps the level of wages down and the share of profits at the maximum.

Job Segregation and Cheap Female Labour

According to ILO and UN assessments, women make up about 40% of the global workforce, but a high 58% of all unpaid work is done by women. 50% of workers in the informal sector are women. In agriculture, the harsh conditions imposed by WTO conditions as well as declining public expenditure have led to acute distress among the large sections of marginal and small farmers across the world. In most developing countries employment in agriculture is still substantial. According to the Food and Agricultural Organisation’s report on women in agriculture, 43% of the labour force in agriculture is women who work at low incomes and wages. Thus in the world of

liberalization, the mass of women workers continue in low paid, low productivity work.

Lower wages for women and continued segregation in the job market have been further extended in the globalised world. The enhanced mobility of capital due to the deregulation regime adopted in developing countries as part of so-called structural adjustment programs of the 1980s has permitted multinational companies to shift their manufacturing units to the developing countries, enabling them to cut costs of production by finding the cheapest sources of labour.

However it is also important to note that women of the developed countries have not received the benefits of the liberalized economic framework that their Governments are pushing on to the rest of the world. In fact, the financial crisis has hit them hard. It would of course have been worse but for the profits brought back into their countries from the labour of workers across the world. But it is not as though women workers in the United States for example have won any super benefits at the cost of their sister workers in developing countries.

One has only to look at the gender wage gap of women in the most developed capitalist country, the United States to understand how women's subordination is a major instrument for cutting costs and enhancing profit. The recommendation for equal wages for women made in 1977 by the Equal Wages Commission is yet to be accepted. Women in the US are paid on average 77 cents for every dollar paid to men and it is worse for African-American (68 cents) and Latina women (58 cents). According to a recent study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research, at this rate, it will take another 45 years for women to catch up with men. A recent study by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) has shown that even though there has been some improvement in desegregation of jobs between men and women, "even in 2013, women and men still continue to work in different jobs." 40% of working women were employed in traditionally female occupations such as social work, nursing and teaching. In contrast fewer than 5% of men worked in these jobs. 44% of men were in traditionally male occupations such as computer programming, aerospace engineering and fire fighting, compared with just 6% of women. Where women are in "male jobs" such as computer programming, they still face a pay gap of 16%.

The Case of Wal-Mart

Wal-Mart is notorious for its bad labour practices. Within the U.S. a discrimination lawsuit was filed on behalf of 16 lakh million women employees of Wal-Mart against widespread gender discrimination. The suit was disallowed by the Supreme Court saying that there were too many women in too many jobs in Wal-Mart for a single lawsuit. Again 1.5 lakh women employees in California also filed a suit with more details of pay gaps and discrimination in promotions. But this was also disallowed in August 2013.

However, the women employees have expressed their determination to fight it out. The 2001 petition had stated the majority of workers are women.

Female workers earned 5200 dollars less than their male counterparts per year. Those who had hourly jobs were paid 1.16 dollars less per hour or around 1100 dollars less per year. Women in salaried positions which should have earned them 50,000 dollars like their male counterparts were paid 14,500 dollars less than their male counterparts in the same position. Thus Wal-Mart cut its costs by millions of dollars every year through gender discriminatory practices.

Further, 60% of its total merchandise is imported from more than 6,000 suppliers in 63 countries, with China at the top of Wal-Mart's supplier list. In 2008, a survey of Wal-Mart suppliers showed that a worker was paid just 55 cents an hour working 12 to 16 hours a day compared to a US worker getting 21 dollars an hour. This is a comparison between male workers. Female workers would be getting even lower wages.

According to the Labour Bureau of Statistics in the US, amongst workers in developing countries where manufacturing units have shifted, only 4% receive wages comparable with the US and only 3% have wages comparable with the European Union countries. Following the introduction of more stringent protections for workers in the export and manufacturing sectors in China, and increases in wages and labour protection measures, Wal-Mart started looking for cheaper labour markets elsewhere.

Wal-Mart has now found the cheapest labour in Bangladesh for garment manufacturing, where it has increased its production by 20% while it has cut its production in China by 5%. Bangladesh is the world's largest garment manufacturer after China, with the bulk of its 21 billion US dollars worth annual exports going to top Western retail multinationals such as Wal-Mart, H and M and Inditex.

In Bangladesh, the workers are overwhelmingly women, who are considered docile, obedient and hardworking with the added advantage, until recently, of a ban on unionisation. The horrendous conditions of work in many of the supplier companies which feed Wal-Mart and others was seen in the collapse of the Rana Plaza complex built on swampy ground outside Dacca, which killed over 1100 workers, mainly women.

It is argued by some analysts that the feminisation of the workforce is advantageous to women, that women workers in Bangladesh at least earn some income thanks to the outsourcing by companies like Wal-Mart. The anti-human justification of pro-liberalisation advocates that something is better than nothing, or poorly paid work is better than no work is condemnable, and must be rejected outright. These spokesmen for the exploiters want the working classes to be pushed back to the conditions of the 19th century so that the 1% can reap the benefits.

Piece Rated Home-based Work

Empirical studies across countries have shown the growing importance in the production process of outsourced home-based work as another cost saving device by corporates. Unfortunately, the ILO, which has a separate convention for Home Based Workers, has no recent assessments of the number of women in home-based work. Typically a woman working at home puts together one part of the product; it could be for an electronic part, for a cosmetic product, for furniture, garments or a host of industries. Through a process of contracting and sub-contracting, the employer-worker relationship gets concealed, letting the employer off the hook as regards any responsibility towards the worker, while making the woman more vulnerable. The scandalously low piece rates that women are paid point to the urgency of recognition of home-based work as a crucial site of exploitation, and also of struggle.

Women's Subsidies to the Capitalist State

One of the pillars of the neo-liberal framework is the privatization of essential services and cutbacks in Government allocations. The increasing costs of education, health care, food, water have had a direct impact on increasing the domestic work burden of women. The old saying "a woman's work is never done" has taken on a new dimension because it is now an intrinsic policy in the framework of the neo-liberal State.

When Governments cut down on social services, care of the sick and elderly, tuitions for children, cutting down on own expenditure to compensate for cuts in pensions, etc. become an intrinsic part of a woman's life. This represents a reverse subsidy that women give to the State and employers. Gender studies conducted by various UN bodies show the close connection between increase in women's domestic work and family care on the one hand and decrease in Government's social spending on the other. The increase in the former is a direct result of the decrease in the latter. At the same time, high food inflation and the consequent food insecurities have a cascading impact on women who are charged, unfairly, with balancing family budgets and who often cut down on their own needs and food requirements.

New forms of labour contracts associated with neo-liberal policies such as outsourced work, flexible time, home-based work, etc. cement the sexual division of labour, with women multitasking and balancing domestic burdens with that of income generation through working at home. Part-time or flexi-work helps employers to reduce wage and infrastructural costs while getting the benefits of working at home at low wages, providing a free worksite, electricity charges, and other infrastructural costs.

Employers describe flexible time as a "sensitive response" of industry to the special needs of women. It is said that women "choose" to take pay cuts, lose out on career prospects and so on. This is an ingenuous argument to conceal the gap that still exists even in the most developed economies. Unfriendly family policies, especially the lack of child care facilities make "flexi-time" the only choice for women. Studies have shown that women cite domestic circumstances, lack of child care services, demands of caring responsibilities as reasons for "opting" for this kind of work.

We must note that this is far removed from the democratic demand of the working class for shorter working hours and flexible timings. Here the penalty for flexi- time is

the double work shift, with more domestic burdens borne by women along with low wages.

Invisible Component of Domestic Work

There is another aspect of this women's subsidy to the State and employer, which is linked to the nature of capitalist exploitation. As Marx showed, the wage earned by the worker is equivalent, not to the value s/he produces but only to the value of the sum of commodities required to ensure the maintenance of the worker and the reproduction of labour power. The amount of time a worker spends in a working day to produce the value of his/her means of subsistence was defined by Marx as necessary labour and the value produced over this as surplus labour. The domestic tasks and role in the care-economy by women of the working classes is an invisible, uncounted and unrecognised component of necessary labour and keeps the costs of the means of subsistence of the worker down. The processes of neo-liberal policies have expanded this aspect. As sex-based division of labour gets reinvented in new forms and the State retreats from its minimum responsibilities of welfare measures and family-friendly labour policies, women bear the burden.

Thus, across the world, these three major areas of exploitation of women (1) the continuing segregation in the labour market and continuation of women in low paid sectors (2) discrimination in wages and (3) increasing domestic burdens, have in different parts of the world in varying degrees been intensified as a result of neo-liberal policies.

INDIA

In India too, the work situation of women displays similar trends.

Women Missing from the Labour Force:

In an unusual decision the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) conducted another survey on employment and unemployment in the Indian economy within just two years of its previous one in 2009-2010. The disturbing trends on women's work noted in the 66th (2009-10) have been reconfirmed, namely the decreasing number of women in the rural labour force.

In India, out of around 47.29 crore workers, 12.81 crores are women workers, of whom around 94% are in the unorganised sector. 75% of women workers in rural India are linked to agriculture compared to 59% men. The most startling figures in the NSSO 66th were that the number of women in the labour force declined by 2.1 crores, compared to 2004-2005. This included women in principal as well as subsidiary status. The 2011-12 survey confirms this trend. In the recent data, 30 lakh more women found employment in urban areas whereas 90 lakh women (principal status) in rural India went missing from the labour force.

By definition, the labour force consists of all women who are looking for work; it includes employed, self employed or unemployed women. The Government claims

that there is a decline because many more young women over 15 years of age, who had been counted as part of the labour force earlier, have now registered education as their principal activity. While there has been a welcome increase in the number of adolescent girls studying in secondary school, studies have shown this is not an adequate explanation for such a huge decrease of women in the labour force.

Some proponents of neo-liberal policies have claimed that the reduction in the labour force figures is because women's work is supplementary to family incomes, and with an increase in male earnings, they prefer to withdraw from the labour force. There is no evidence of such a wave of prosperity which would provide women with such choices. The increase in consumption expenditure figures that are used to buttress this argument may cause a flutter of excitement among the neo-liberal advocates, but in fact the real figures of earnings in the same survey are exceedingly low. This choice-based withdrawal argument is a cruel misreading of realities.

It is more likely that given the volatility in the labour market and the temporary nature of jobs available, women's participation in the labour force is undercounted and invisibilised. The undercounting of migrant women workers is well-known. A large number of women take in home-based work but do not necessarily report themselves as workers. It could also be the case that women who have tried hard but unsuccessfully to find work also do not report themselves as workers.

But even from the rest of the figures it is clear that the claims that liberalisation has helped Indian women in the economic sphere are far from true. The large number of disappeared women from the labour force signifies distress at a level which is unrecognised in policy formulations.

Less Work Opportunities for Women

The NSSO divides workers into three employment status categories in urban and rural areas (1) in regular (salaried) work, (2) in casual (daily wage) work, and (3) self-employed. It is seen that among all women workers, the share of regular workers registered a small one per cent increase from 9% to 10.1% between 2004-2005 and 2009-2010. However, the share of casual workers registered a substantial increase of more than 65 from 30% to 36. Male casual workers also increased by around 5%. Thus the global trend of casualisation of the workforce is also seen in India.

The largest employment status category for both men and women is self-employment. The share of self employment is generally higher among women workers than among male workers. Among women workers, there was a sharp decrease in the share of self employment from 61% to 53.3% between 2004-05 and 2009-10. For men, the decline is lower, from 54.2% to 50%. Within two years, the pendulum has swung the other way, with the share of self employment for women workers, increasing to 56.1% in 2011-12 and that of casual labour declining to 31.2%.

Thus it would seem that a section of the women workers in distress shuttle between self-employment and casual work for an income, but neither provides them with either sufficient or stable income. This bursts the balloon of self-employment floated by the Government as a viable alternative in a situation of job-loss growth generated by its neo-liberal policies.

Unpaid Labour of Women:

But there is another aspect which requires more attention. This pertains to the unpaid work done by women. Among self-employed women, there is a sub-category defined as “helpers in family enterprises,” that is those involved in economic activity in the production of goods and services. It could be work on farms or in family businesses, but the critical factor here is that these family helpers are unpaid.

According to recent calculations (by Indrani Mazumdar and N.Neetha at the CWDS) of the total 12.74 crore strong female work force in India, 4.52 crore, that is 35% are unpaid. In rural areas, the proportion of the unpaid rural female workforce is over 40%. It could be argued that since they are working in family enterprises, they share in the family income and standard of living. But given what we know about intra-household dynamics and distribution of resources, this would be a superficial view. Moreover men working in the same enterprises who own those enterprises do not register themselves as “family helpers.” Women do not own land and have no assets except their own labour. The fact that such a large proportion of women are tied to unpaid work with no assets or independent incomes shows the continuing domination of patriarchal practices in India.

The Myth of New Opportunities:

Another claim is that liberalisation has provided opportunities to women in different avenues. This may be true to the extent that a certain class of women have found increased employment in the IT and communications sectors and in the hospitality industry, but their numbers are relatively small. In urban India, it is not these high profile industries, but the paid domestic work sector that has seen the largest growth in women’s employment. Yet the Government of India has refused to sign the ILO convention that accords recognition to basic rights of workers to workers in domestic services. The number of paid women workers in manufacturing actually came down from 1.16 crores 2004-05 to 1.07 crores in 2009-10. This shows that the export-led growth policies and the setting up of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) have not been of any use in creating employment. Capital intensive industries, as we see in India, do not provide jobs. The decrease in manufacturing employment also adversely impacts on the home-based outsourced sector; women find it increasingly difficult to get work and this also tends to further drive down the piece rated wage rates.

Another substantial increase has been of women in construction work, whose numbers have more than doubled from around 20 lakhs to 65 lakhs in 2009-2010. The construction industry is virtually defined by the casual nature of employment, the domination of contractors, unsafe and highly vulnerable conditions of work and even residence.

The experience in India differs from some other countries which became manufacturing hubs of multinational capital, exploiting cheap labour. In India, agriculture and services still account for a greater share of employment rather than manufacturing. The position of women as far as employment and wages is concerned has seen an advance in limited sectors. On the contrary, increasing unemployment among women and the trend of casualisation of work contracts signals a deterioration in work standards and wages.

A large number of women are involved in retailing. The decision of the Government of India to allow 51% FDI in multi-brand retailing will have very negative consequences. There are over 1.2 crore shops in India employing over 4 crore persons. 95% of them are small shops run by self-employed persons. They are going to be hit the hardest, with the entry of the MNC retailers such as Wal-Mart. One can imagine what would happen, for example with the unique Women's Market in Imphal!

The Government, which has so far been the main employer of women in the organised sector, has through its policy of disinvestment and "downsizing" restricted the recruitment of women. There has been a phenomenal growth of the unorganised sector through contract, casual and outsourcing in public sector enterprises. Approximately a crore of women are employed in various Government schemes without being recognised as Government workers, and without proper pay scales and benefits. Flagship programmes like the ICDS, NHRM and the Mid Day Meal Scheme are dependent on these women workers such as ASHAs, Anganwadi workers and helpers, etc. who are being exploited by the Government by paying them a pittance.

Situation of Women Workers in Agriculture:

Agriculture is still the single largest sector where women find work, but increasing mechanisation has led to decreasing workdays for agricultural workers. There are hardly any alternative avenues of employment for women outside traditional agricultural work, and it is here that the distress is most acute.

Much has been made of the increase in wages of women agricultural workers wages due to the implementation of the MNREGA. However, in comparison to the previous abysmally dismal level of wages of women, even a 100% increase does not amount to much in real terms. But the fact is that agriculture is not providing sufficient number of workdays and with a poor national average of just around 50 days of work a year, MNREGA is not an alternative, which is why female migration is increasing every year. The exception is Tripura which holds the best record in the country providing an average of 89 days of work a year under MNREGA, with a high percentage of women workers benefiting from the program.

Caste and Intensified Exploitation

In India, unlike in other countries, the segregation of work is not limited to a gender based framework, but linked closely with caste. Women of the so-called lower castes, the dalits and adivasis are relegated to the bottom of the ladder. They are mainly involved in unskilled manual work and more specifically in the case of scheduled castes, in the so-called "unclean" professions such as manual scavengers, sweepers and so on. According to the Second Annual Employment Report of the Ministry of Labour, based on NSSO data 2009-2010, only 10% of women were in regular employment. Among all workers in regular employment, STs comprised 7.73%, SCs are below 13%, OBCs slightly over 13% and "others", that is workers of the upper castes comprised almost 24%.

Further, only 5% of women of the lowest quintile (that is the bottom 20% of the population in terms of consumption expenditure), in which SC and ST women predominate, have regular jobs. The inequality in access to decent work has

intensified for both men and women, but more particularly for women from the poorest and the SC and ST categories.

Santhara, a 35 year old woman belonging to the Scheduled Caste Vadar community, along with her old mother and teenaged daughter wait at a stop on the main road in Yeotmal district of Maharashtra. It is 5.30 in the morning and already the sun is up and it looks like it is going to be another hot summer day. After a short while a tractor drives up close to the women and unloads a heap of big stones. Santhara picks up a large iron hammer while her daughter and mother rush to separate the pile of stones, each stone weighing 8 to 10 kilos. Santhara lifts the heavy hammer high swinging her body to the side and then brings the hammer down with all her strength. It makes a huge sound, but the stone merely cracks. She has to break the stone into 8 mm sized pieces. On an average, it takes her 50 lifts and hits of the hammer for each stone. For the breaking of one brass of stones, a measurement which roughly means around 100 to 125 big stones, she will raise the heavy hammer more than five thousand times in a single day. The three women have two hammers between them, one of which is borrowed and for which they have to pay thirty rupees. They take turns at the work. It takes them anything between 10 to 12 hours to break the stones into the size of the chips required.

The heat is now unbearable but the women stop only for a frugal meal of rotis and chilli paste. The women earn three hundred rupees between them minus the payment for the hammer, less than a hundred rupees each a day. There is no other work available. This is Vidarbha, the suicide belt of Maharashtra. With the decline in the number of days of work available in agriculture, women like Santhara have no alternative but for this hard manual labour. In this area MNREGA has given an average of only 20 days of work a year.

The sun has slipped over the horizon and darkness descends by the time the three tired women reach their home, a 5 km walk from the road. Santhara's body is wracked with pain every waking hour. At night to deal with the pain she drinks at least two glasses of the local alcoholic brew and that enables her to sleep. She falls sick very often but if the road making, stone breaking work is available, she will be there again... When asked, the Rural Development official in the area speaks contemptuously of the women, Oh they are notorious, he says, I wouldn't advise you to go to their village at night, you will find them all drunk.

Switch to Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand - three tempos drive up belching smoke. It is 7.30 in the morning. The tempos are packed with women of different ages, all adivasis. They jump down from the vehicles each paying the driver ten rupees. They are the first to arrive at the labour market. Soon the crowd increases - men and women, some with shovels, some with pickaxes, the women with cloth wound tightly around their heads. The contractors and their men arrive. They walk up and down looking at the workers as though they are cattle. One contractor picks out 12 workers, the

five women among them are all young. An older woman moves along with them. The contractor stops her, using abusive language. A younger woman speaks softly, we work as a pair, she is my mother, she says. He laughs and nudges the older woman, all right you can come too but I will give you one third of what your daughter will earn. 'Two for the price of one.'

These are Ranchi's construction workers. Bina, the daughter starts the work. She carries at least 8 bricks at a time on her head. The building they are working on has reached the first floor, so she balances as she walks up a sloping plank. Each brick weighs around two and a half kilos. There are also three kilo bricks. So she is carrying a weight of between 20-24 kilos at a time. Her mother helps her to pile the bricks on and also carries the same number of bricks. On an average a woman construction worker on the site carries between 1500 to 2000 bricks a day and even more depending on how high she has to climb. The minimum weight that she carries a day is 3000 kgs. For this she is paid between 100 and 150 rupees a day at most and sometimes when there is less work available and the labour supply more, she could get as little as 60 or 70 rupees. Like Santhara, Bina too suffers from severe aches. The pain has become an intrinsic part of my life, she says, I don't remember a single day without it. She does not possess an identity card nor does she have access to any social security benefits. It takes too much time at the Labour office she says. My family eats when I work. How can I spend weeks trying to get the card? She falls ill often, but nonetheless drags herself to work. On some days, she spends 20 rupees on transport but does not find work. On those days she often goes to the nearby forest and picks wood which she dries and sells.

Across the country, women like Santhara and Bina, dalit and adivasi women, work their lives out in hard backbreaking work which should make any civilised country hang its head in shame. Frail women carrying loads of 3000 kilos a day or breaking stones, raising and hitting a heavy hammer 5000 times, to earn meagre amounts. The ILO definition of Decent Work becomes a mockery in the reality of the work that women do in India.

The utilisation of caste to intensify extraction of surplus value of dalit and adivasi men and women is reflected in the unequal wages between social groups in the following Table:

Average Daily Wage Rates (in Rs.) Across Different Population Groups and Types of Works, 2009-10

Population Groups	Average Daily Wage (in Rs.)		
	Regular Workers	Casual in Public Works	Casual in Other Works
Sector			
Rural	229.35	93.53	92.56
Urban	362.35	95.34	122.33
Gender			

Male	330.08	98.80	106.31
Female	249.51	86.54	70.19
Social Groups			
ST	265.81	87.70	77.19
SC	236.16	94.47	95.29
OBC	274.24	92.15	101.17
Others	388.27	105.20	103.20

Source: NSSO, 2009-10, calculated from unit level records – for all age groups

To conclude, we can see that the position of women as far as employment and wages is concerned has seen little advance; on the contrary, increasing unemployment and the casualisation of work contracts signals a deterioration in work standards and wages for women. Patriarchal and casteist notions and the segregation of the workforce, with women bearing a disproportionately larger share of unpaid work including in the domestic sphere, points to the hollowness of the claims made by the advocates of the neo-liberal framework. While we can be proud of the achievements of the younger generation of women who have shown tremendous courage and enterprise in breaking barriers in a myriad fields, these achievements are still restricted to far too small a segment of the population. Clearly as far as economic independence is concerned, neo-liberal policies in India have proved that it is only in policy reversal that women can advance.

STRATEGIES OF STRUGGLE

All over the world, the strategies of struggle of organizations and people's mobilizations are based on national experiences. In India, the last decade in particular has seen intensified struggles and resistance against globalisation policies. But often the approach is confined to a narrow reading of the impact of globalisation.

The failure of the capitalist system, the system dominating the world, to successfully address gender discrimination is not fortuitous. On the contrary, capitalism in its various phases has utilized and strengthened patriarchal practices to maximise profits. There is a school of thought even among critics of capitalism that gender discrimination and exploitation is only a remnant of feudal thinking which can be eliminated through the "modernizing" influence of capitalist processes. This flawed understanding has implications for revolutionary movements for social change; by denying the systemic nature of gender discrimination under capitalism, it tends to look at its various dimensions, not as an issue related to class struggle, but one that should focus on the struggle to change the "mindset" of people.

Although an ideological and political struggle against patriarchal and male supremacist cultures and practices should of course be an important agenda for Left led struggles, this understanding is problematic as it tends to underestimate the intertwining of capitalism and patriarchy and the systemic nature of women's subordination which acts as an instrument to further capitalist profit. We see through the experience of women across the world, how the policies and cultures of

imperialist globalization have in fact strengthened patriarchal notions and practices and reinvented the sexual division of labour in different ways.

Building the Class Struggle

What are the perspectives and the strategies to mobilize people and in particular women that emerge from our experience of the fight against globalisation? The first and foremost requirement is to study emerging trends in the labour market and to strategise accordingly. It is often the case that the most exploited among these sections are outside the pale of the organized movements. This is of relevance not only to women's organizations and movements, but also to all progressive forces, political parties which believe in fundamental social change.

The main feature of neo-liberal policies is one of obscene social inequalities and the growing gap between rich and poor women. Yet it has not been reflected in a sustained manner with the prioritization of issues of poor women in the strategies and mobilizations of the Left and class and mass movements. In particular, the experience of rural poor women and their struggle for survival does not find sufficient focus in our struggles, although for example, efforts to organise rural women for their rights on MNREGA work sites have had a tremendous impact on the struggles of other sections of rural poor in those States where they have been conducted.

Women from marginal and small peasant households working on meagre family landholdings are a section that is marginalized even amongst the peasant movements. They are not even recognised as farmers. For example, the suicide of a woman farmer in Vidarbha caused by the same tragic circumstances of debt and hopelessness does not elicit a response for compensation from the Government as she is not considered a "breadwinner". Recognition of their work is obviously critical for raising the specific issues and problems they face as a consequence of the present pro-corporate agricultural policies.

Looking at the data, one gets a glimpse of the terrible instability in the lives of the working people caused by these policies, the only constant being that there is no constant, as far as work, wages or income are concerned for the mass of women. In addition, (and this is an important aspect which is not reflected in statistics), as a survival strategy, poor women will find some kind of work sporadic, temporary, however terrible the working conditions may be.

The patterns and current nature of women's work/employment also pose specific challenges to her participation in the struggles against the policies which are further marginalizing her work. In the case of women's work in most sectors, the employer-worker relationship is often concealed through different layers of middle men. It is a vicious circle - of isolated work at low rates and no protective legislation, with the very nature of that isolation and fragmented process of production weakening her ability to participate in a struggle to change that position. Moreover as seen in the figures quoted earlier, a large section of women are in casual or contract work and therefore much more vulnerable to the danger of losing their jobs.

Traditional forms of organizing working women are equally relevant today where women are in common work sites in manufacturing, construction sites, and so on. At

the same time the experience of working with women in the unorganized sector points to the importance of contacts within residential areas where working women live and more so now when the home is also the worksite for large sections of women. There is a need to build alliances between a range of residential and neighbourhood based mass organizations, groups, individuals and with class based organizations of trade unions and peasant and agricultural workers' organizations. As a strategy to develop the class struggle it is critical to involve more and wider sections of women of the classes of the working poor.

Differentiations among Working Women

We have to recognize and address the changes which are taking place among younger sections of urban middle class women. As noted, a section have benefited in some sectors of employment with new opportunities opening up for them in service sectors such as hospitality, retail, tourism, communications and finance. Even though their numbers are small compared to the female population, they form an important component among the middle classes. The expansion of literacy and education is a positive change. Many more young women in small towns are looking for work outside their homes. There are new aspirations and dreams among these sections. Such developments objectively challenge traditional barriers to women's access to public spaces and stereotypical roles that women are expected to fulfil. This is a most positive development.

However an increasing problem is that of the sexual harassment at the workplace, or in the transport they use while commuting. The 10-15% increase in cases of violence against women over the last decade is a matter of deep concern. Market cultures nurture and intensify the commodification of women. The struggle against neo-liberal policies can be broadened to include these concerns and to overcome the distances which may exist between the new entrants into the workforce and the traditional trade unions and women's organizations.

Social Differentiations

The common bonds of class unity are based on the exploitation of all working people and this must be stressed. But in today's context is this enough? The working people in India have social differentiations linked to caste and community apart from the gender aspect we have been discussing. No struggle against globalisation can go forward which does not understand these links and the way that neo-liberal policies have intensified the class exploitation using historically determined social inequalities. This is more of a challenge today because one of the accompanying ideologies promoted by market based policies is that of a narrow form of identity politics.

The slogan of class unity will have meaning for a dalit or adivasi woman only if our mass movements mobilize all workers against the specific oppression and exploitation that she faces as a dalit or adivasi; Muslim women will be drawn to movements which take up and highlight the specific discrimination they face as Muslims. Thus, struggles against neo-liberal policies cannot go ahead without specific reference to the impact on working women from these different sections. In other words, unless the specific oppressions, exploitations and discriminations which occur because of their

being dalits, women, tribals or Muslims, are addressed, Left strategies in India to counter identity politics cannot be successful. The slogan of class unity rings hollow to these masses if their specific issues are not given due prominence by all workers and progressive movements. We must understand the differentiation that is taking place due to neo-liberal policies and address it in a comprehensive manner.

A Marxist Understanding

Another aspect of the problem is the understanding that such issues are “social” issues which are subordinate to class issues. This is rooted in a very mechanical interpretation of the Marxist understanding of base and superstructure. In his preface to ‘A Critique of Political Economy’ Marx had written “ In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life ... changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.”

From this, some sections of the Left have concluded that issues related to caste, gender or religion based discriminations are in the realm of the superstructure and therefore at best, are not priorities for the working class movement, and at worst are to be left to be dealt with after the revolution! Such an erroneous view has done incalculable damage to the movement. The way in which Indian society has historically developed with the close intertwining of caste and class, it is crystal clear that caste has been used as a tool to extract more surplus from the labour of the so-called ‘untouchables’ and *shudras*. Patriarchal cultures have been used to depress the value of female labour. In this context, therefore, caste and gender appear as class issues.

However, while the large majority of dalits and tribals belong to the basic classes of workers and small peasants, women and minorities are not homogenous communities. The discrimination a woman belonging to a relatively well-off section may face certainly cannot be equated with a factory woman worker even though they are both women. But, at the same time, as a woman in this patriarchal society, she is also vulnerable to patriarchal violence. Among Muslims, although substantial sections belong to professions and communities that have been traditionally exploited, there is no homogeneity of class backgrounds. In this context these are social issues, relating to the question of social oppression.

Thus there are both class aspects as well as social aspects that the Left must address in its approach. By subsuming all this together under the category of “social issues”, we tend to underestimate the critical role that organising these sections plays in the current struggle to change the correlation of forces in India. On the contrary, the absence of Left initiatives will strengthen the trend of narrow identity politics.

Neo-liberal policies have had a wide ranging impact on society, on production processes as well as social relations. The urgency to take up issues of dalits, tribals, women and minorities cannot be emphasized enough. These are the social sections that should be the natural constituency for the Left and democratic forces in our country. Effectively combining the struggles against class exploitation and social oppression of these sections is a strategic task before the Left and essential for taking forward the current struggles against globalisation.

Globally, we see the utter failure of capitalism as a system to meet human needs. The global financial crisis has highlighted the unsustainability of imperialist globalisation. In spite of the huge developments in technology and communications which open up tremendous possibilities for human advance, in its ever-increasing drive for profits, imperialist globalisation is destroying the potential of humankind for a better life.

The need for the unity of the working people against these policies and the so-called pro-corporate 'trickle-down' model of development underlying them cannot be overemphasized. It is critical for any strategy against globalization. However, to build such a unity it is also essential to gather together all those sections who face discriminations on a broad platform against globalization and neo-liberal policies. The different dimensions of imperialist globalisation require multi-pronged strategies of resistance. The struggle for alternative policies in India is not and cannot be a struggle limited to political parties. It must be based on the broad alliances of the working classes and other oppressed sections. Women's movements which challenge the status quo in numerous ways are an integral part of such an effort.

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