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Gender Concerns and Strategies in the Resistance to Imperialist Globalisation

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 neoliberal 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 victims of sexual exploitation. Indeed trafficking constitutes one of the fastest growing "industries" in the world.

The reality of gender injustice is captured by different measurements used by countries. One such measurement has been

THE MARXIST

developed by the World Economic Forum through the Gender Gap Index, which looks at four indicators, namely economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. In the most recent index for 2012 released earlier this year, 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, China at 69. Significantly, gender equality in Socialist Cuba takes it first among the Latin American countries and puts Socialist Cuba 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 with a 15 point gap remaining even in the best performing Nordic countries. These are the countries, who till recently, have 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, France 31. While in education many countries have made remarkable advances in increasing equal access to boys and girls, men and women, the record in health and survival is poor.

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

While there may be weaknesses in the method of computation, almost all gender indicators-including the gender index 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?

The impact of the global financial crisis on women has been particularly severe as documented through the reports of international agencies pushing more women into poverty, malnourishment, hunger and joblessness.

It had its roots in the increased power of global finance capital and a deregulated global regime, spanning transnational boundaries and 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 responsible for the crisis in the first place were given huge bailouts by global institutions and Governments. In essence the dubious risks and unethical decisions were underwritten by central banks and states, making them even more profligate. 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 *additional* fiscal spending of 2.4 trillion dollars (in the wake of the financial crisis), as much as two-thirds went to the financial sector while just 8 per cent went on health and 5 per cent each on infrastructure and education. Thus the priorities of the leading capitalist countries like the US set the pattern for other countries. 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 per cent against the 99 per cent.

Some examples cited by the ILO of the so-called austerity measures:

Germany: Cuts in social security measures and in protective legislations for workers;

France: Cuts in public pensions, health care;

THE MARXIST

Italy: Freeze on labour recruitment cuts in public sector wages cuts in 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.

Such austerity measures that affect all working people have a differential impact on women.

GROWING UNEMPLOYMENT

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

However the export oriented segments of economies in developing countries have also been badly hit because of cancellation of orders. The UNIFEM estimated that women comprise 60-80 per cent of export manufacturing industries in developing countries. Thus employment of women particularly has been badly affected by the crisis. This reserve army of labour in turn makes workers more vulnerable and gives an advantage to capital over labour. According to recent estimates, of the 3.3 billion strong workforce in the world, at the end of 2012 there were 202 million unemployed. Since the crisis 55 million jobs “are missing”. According to the ILO report the number is rising in 2013.

In particular unemployment among youth has reached unprecedented levels. Global youth unemployment stood at 12.6 per cent with an increasing the unemployment rate among young people to between 16 and 17 per cent in developed economies and the

European Union region. In countries where employment growth has resumed, the nature of jobs are increasingly short term, involuntary-part time and temporary.

A shocking global picture emerges, a strong indictment of the capitalist system, that more than fifty per cent 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. The UN Women Report estimates that among these “vulnerable” workers, 56 per cent are women. On the one hand in general the present framework of globalisation has led to high rates of unemployment and underemployment described as jobloss 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, which keeps the level of wages down and the share of profits at the maximum.

JOB SEGREGATION AND CHEAP FEMALE LABOUR

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

According to ILO and UN assessments, women make up about 40 per cent of the global workforce, but a high 58 per cent of all unpaid work is done by women. 50 per cent of workers in the informal sector are women. In agriculture, the harsh conditions of neoliberal frameworks imposed by WTO conditions, as well as declining public expenditure, in agriculture have led to acute distress among the large sections of marginal and small farmers across the world. At the global level, employment in agriculture has declined. However in most

THE MARXIST

developing countries it is still substantial. On average according to the Food and Agricultural Organisation's report on women in agriculture, 43 per cent of the existing labour force in agriculture is of women with low incomes and wages.

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

However it is important to note that in the present circumstances women of the developed countries have not got the benefit of the liberalized economic framework that their Governments are pushing on to the rest of the world. In fact the impact of 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.

IN THE U.S.

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 are 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 to men in the US. 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." Forty per cent of working women were employed in traditionally female occupations such as social work, nursing and teaching. In contrast fewer than 5 per cent of men worked in these jobs. Forty four per cent of men were in traditionally male occupations such as computer programming, aerospace engineering and firefighting, compared with just 6 per cent of women in these jobs" Where women are in "male jobs" such as computer programming, they still face a pay gap of 16 per cent.

THE CASE OF WALMART

The example of Walmart, the giant US retail company is a good example as its anti-women practices are global including within the U.S.

Walmart is notorious for its bad labour practices. Within the U.S. a discrimination lawsuit was filed on behalf of 1.6 million women employees of Walmart against widespread gender discrimination. The suit was disallowed by the Supreme Court saying that there were too many women in too many jobs in Walmart for a single lawsuit. Again 1.5 lakh women employees in California also a suit with more details of pay gaps and discrimination in promotions but in early August 2013, this was also disallowed. But 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 less than their male counterpart in the same position. Thus Walmart cut its costs by millions of dollars every year through gender discriminatory practices.

Further, sixty percent 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 Walmart 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, workers in developing countries where manufacturing units have shifted received only 4 per cent receive wages comparable with the US and 3 per cent 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, Walmart started looking for cheaper labour markets elsewhere.

In a spiralling downwardly competitive equilibrium for labour wages and rights, Walmart has now found the cheapest labour in

THE MARXIST

Bangladesh for garment manufacturing , where it has increased its production by 20 per cent while it has cut its production in China by 5 per cent. Bangladesh is the world's largest garment manufacturer after China, with the bulk of the 21 billion annual exports going to top Western retail multinationals like Walmart, H and M and Inditex.

In Bangladesh, the workers are overwhelmingly female workers 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 Walmart 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 at least female workers in Bangladesh have some income thanks to the outsourcing by companies like Walmart. The anti-human justification of pro-liberalisation advocates that something is better than nothing, 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 while the one per cent can reap the benefits.

PIECE RATE HOMEBASED WORK

Another method of exploitation of female labour is the outsourced homebased work which is being adopted increasingly by companies to cut costs. Unfortunately, the ILO which has a separate convention for Home Based Workers has no recent assessments of the number of women in homebased work. Empirical studies across countries have shown the growing importance in the production process of outsourced homebased work as another cost saving device by corporates. 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, making the woman more vulnerable. The scandalously low piece rates women are paid point

to the urgency of recognition of homebased work as a crucial site of exploitation and also of struggle.

WOMEN'S SUBSIDIES TO THE CAPITALIST STATE

One of the pillars of the neoliberal 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 share 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 neoliberal State.

When Governments cut down on social services, the share of the domestic care economy dependent on women's work grows. The care of the sick and elderly, tuitions for children, cutting down on own expenditure to balance budgets to compensate for cuts in pensions 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 unpaid 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 neoliberal policies like outsourced work, flexible time, homebased work in which women across the globe, 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 cut wage and infrastructural costs while getting the benefit of the work done by women 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 housework caregiving gap that

THE MARXIST

still exists even in the most developed economies. Unfriendly family policies by the State lack of child care facilities make “flexi-time” the only choice for women. Studies have shown that women “opting” for this work cite domestic circumstances, lack of child care services, demands of caring responsibilities as reasons.

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 responsibilities borne by women along with low wages.

INVISIBLE COMPONENT

There is another aspect of this women’s subsidy to the State and employer 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 (*Perspective on Women’s Issues and Tasks*, CPI(M)).

The processes of neoliberal policies have expanded this aspect. As sexbased 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.

TRENDS ACROSS THE WORLD

These three major areas of exploitation of women (1) continuing segregation in the labour market and common trend of women’s work in low paid sectors (2) discrimination in wages (3) increasing domestic burdens, have in different parts of the world in varying degrees got intensified by neoliberal policies.

In India too, trends in work are similar. There are different

sources of information such as the NSSO surveys, the Census, the surveys done by the Ministry of Rural Development, of the Labour Ministry concerning aspects of women's work and the participation of women in the work force. A comparison of trends from these different surveys would be a useful exercise. Here the NSS surveys on employment/ unemployment are being used.

INDIA

In an unusual decision the NSSO held a large survey on employment and unemployment in the Indian economy within just two years of its previous one in 2009-2010. The 68th round claims an increase in as many as 14 million jobs between 2009-2010 and 2011-2012 of which 3 million were for women in urban India. The details on other counts are yet to be released but the disturbing trends on women's work noted in the 66th round, which some experts had considered an aberration, have been reconfirmed, namely the decreasing number of women in the rural labour force.

In India, out of around 472.9 million workers, 128.11 million are women workers of whom around 94 per cent are in the unorganised sector. Seventy five per cent of women workers in rural India were linked to agriculture compared to 59 per cent males. The most startling figures in the NSSO 66th round were that there were 21 million less women workers in the labour force in 2009-2010, compared to 2004-2005. This included women in principal as well as subsidiary status. The 2011-12 survey confirms this trend

The labour force by definition, includes employed, self employed or unemployed women, all women who are looking for work. In the recent data 3 million more women found employment in urban areas whereas 9 million women (principal status) in rural India went missing from the labour force.

The Government claims that this has happened because many more young women over 15 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 adolescents studying in secondary school, as some studies have shown this cannot explain the huge decrease of women in the labour force, which was low in any case. Some other proponents of neoliberal policies have

THE MARXIST

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 increased consumption expenditure figures may cause a flutter of excitement among pro- 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. It is already known that there is an undercounting of migrant women workers. A large number of women take in homebased work but need not necessarily report themselves as workers. It could also be the case that women have tried hard to find work and, not being successful, 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.

LOWER WORK OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

The NSS 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 per cent to 10.1 per cent between 2004-2005 and 2009-2010. However, the share of casual workers registered a substantial increase of more than 6 per cent from 30 per cent to 36 per cent. The number of casual workers among men also increased by around 5 per cent. Thus, the global trend of casualisation of the workforce is seen in India too.

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 per cent to 53.3 per cent between 2004-05 and 2009-10. For men the fall was less from 54.2 per cent to 50 per cent. Within two years, the pendulum started swinging the other way with the share of self employment increasing to 56.1 per cent among women workers while the share of casual labour dropped to 31.2 per cent.

Thus it would seem that a section of the workers shuttle in distress between self-employment and casual work for an income, and neither provides them with either sufficient or stable income. This bursts the balloon floated by the Government that self-employment was a viable alternative in the context of Government policies of jobless growth.

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 127.46 million strong female work force in India, 45.22 million, that is 35 per cent, are unpaid. In rural areas, the percentage of the unpaid rural female workforce is over 40 per cent. 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 share 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, have no assets except their own labour. The fact that such a large percentage of women are tied to unpaid work with no assets or independent incomes, shows the continuing domination of patriarchal practices in India.

Another claim is how liberalisation has provided opportunities to women in many more avenues of work. This is true to the extent that a certain class of women have found increased employment in IT, the hospitality industry, communications. But these have been in relatively smaller numbers. In urban India it is not these more high

THE MARXIST

profile industries, but work as domestic maids which has seen the largest growth in employment for women. Even while this is the reality, India has refused to sign the ILO convention that accords recognition to basic rights of workers to those in domestic service as maids. The number of paid women workers in manufacturing actually came down from 11.64 million in 2004-05 to 10.75 million in 2009-10. This shows that the export led growth policies and the setting up of SEZs has not been of any benefit in increasing work which in fact has gone down. Capital intensive industries as we see in India, do not provide jobs. Decreases in manufacturing employment also impacts on homebased outsourced work which will also automatically decrease. Thus women in homebased work find it increasingly difficult to get work and it will also tend to further drive down piece rates.

Another substantial increase has been of women in construction work whose numbers have more than doubled from around 2.07 million to 6.50 million 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.

A large number of women are involved in retailing. The decision of the Government of India to allow 51 per cent FDI in multibrand retailing will have very negative consequences. There are over 1.2 crore shops in India employing over 4 crore persons. 95 percent of these shops are run by self-employed persons in less than 500 sq.ft. area. These small shopkeepers in the urban areas are going to be hit the hardest with the entry of the MNC retailers like Walmart. Imagine if big stores come into Imphal for example, what will be the impact on the unique Women's Market. At a time when the Government has utterly failed to provide jobs why is it bent on snatching the jobs and livelihood that people have through small retailing.

The Government which was the main employer of women in the organised sector, has through its policy of disinvestment and "downsizing" restricted the recruitment of women. On the contrary in the public sector the growth of the unorganised sector through contract, casual and outaourcing has grown phenomenally. Approximately 50 lakh women are employed in various Government schemes without being recognised as Government workers with the right to Government level wages. Flagship programmes like the ICDS,

NHRM and the mid day meal scheme are dependent on these women workers like ASHAs, ICDS helpers and workers, Mid Day meal scheme workers and so on. But not only are they denied recognition as Government employees, Government exploits their services paying them a pittance.

IN AGRICULTURE

In agriculture increasing mechanisation has led to decreasing workdays for agricultural workers. However it is still the single largest sector where women find work with a reduction in workdays. But there are hardly any alternative avenues of employment for women outside traditional agricultural work. It is in this area that distress is most acute.

Much has been made of the increase in agricultural women workers wages seen as a reflection of NREGA. If one considers the absolutely dismal level of wages of women earlier, even 100 per cent 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, NREGA 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, with a high percentage of women.

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

STRATEGIES OF STRUGGLE

All over the world, the strategies of struggle of organizations and peoples mobilizations are based on national experiences. In India, the last decade in particular has seen intensified struggles and

THE MARXIST

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 as 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 organizations and movements but also to all progressive forces, political parties which believe in fundamental social change.

The main feature of neoliberal policies, that of obscene social

inequalities, the growing gap between rich and poor women, has yet to see a sustained reflection in the strategies and mobilizations of the Left and class and mass movements with the prioritization of issues of poor women. In particular the experience of rural poor women and their struggle for survival does not find sufficient focus in our struggles. Yet for example efforts to help rural women fight for their rights in NREGA work sites have had a tremendous impact on the struggles of other sections of rural poor in the States where they have organized.

Marginal and poor women farmers working on small family landholdings are a section who are marginalized even among peasant movements. Their recognition as farmers itself is absent. For example the suicide of a woman farmer in Vidarbha caused by the same tragic circumstances of debt and hopelessness would not elicit a response for compensation from the Government as they are not considered “breadwinners” or farmers. Recognition of their work is obviously critical to 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, that as a survival strategy, poor women will find some kind of work sporadic, temporary, whatever the terrible conditions may be.

The patterns and current nature of women’s work/employment 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 when the very nature of that isolation and fragmented process of production weakens 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 job.

Traditional forms of organizing working women are equally relevant today where women are in common work sites in

THE MARXIST

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. The need to build alliances between a range of residential and neighbourhood based mass organizations, groups, individuals, with class based organizations of trade union and peasant and agricultural worker organizations even in day to day work as a strategy to develop class struggle 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 like hospitality, retail, tourism, also in communications and even financial sectors. 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, the larger number of girls in schools are some of the positive changes that have come about. Many more young women in small towns are looking for work outside the homes. There are new aspirations and dreams among these sections. Such developments objectively challenge traditional barriers in women's access to public spaces and stereotypical roles that women are expected to fulfill. This is a most positive development.

However an increasing issue is that of the sexual harassment at the workplace, in buses they travel on to get to work and so on. The increase in atrocities against women between ten and fifteen percent over the last decade, is a matter of deep concern. Market cultures nurture and intensify the commodification of women. The struggle against neoliberal 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 union 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 neoliberal 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 are 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; struggles against neoliberal policies cannot go ahead without specific reference to the impact on working women of these different sections. In other words, unless the specific oppressions, exploitations and discriminations addressed which occur because of their being dalits, women, tribals or Muslims, 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 neoliberal 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

THE MARXIST

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 Indian society has historically developed with the close intertwining of caste and class, it is clear enough 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 the better off sections 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 perpetrated on women. Among Muslims, although substantial sections belong to professions and communities which 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 lumping all this together under the category of “social issues” we tend to underestimate the critical role that work among 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 driven by retrogressive forces.

Neoliberal 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.

CONCLUSION

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, 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 – indeed the very so-called pro-corporate trickle-down theory based development model underlying it – cannot be overemphasized. It is critical for any strategy against globalization. However to build such a unity it is essential also 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 but 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.