

Women: Targets of Global Exploitation

Let's Fight Back!

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Two-thirds of all the work in the world is done by women. Women in the Third World sew the clothes, put together the stereos, and produce the food for people in the First World. But a hard day's labor is still considered a masculine thing. It is the invisibility of women's labor, along with women's isolation from each other, that keeps the exploitation of women going. Patriarchal exploitation has fed the expansion of capitalism for hundreds of years. On top of the work women do to support themselves and children, women do unwaged work like cooking, cleaning, and taking care of kids. This work makes it possible for themselves, husbands and boyfriends, and future generations to go out and work. Bosses profit from this unwaged labor but women remain economically dependent on men.

The continual extraction of wealth from countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America by imperialist forces in countries such as the United States, Japan and those in Western Europe depends on a division of labor between the countries that produce and the countries that consume. One aspect of this relationship is that as the consuming countries take in so many commodities that they become overdeveloped, the producing countries are made poor and are being underdeveloped.

Although imperialism and capitalist patriarchy have been around making people's lives hell for years, the global economy has been going through a restructuring in the past few decades that is called neo-liberalism. The power of transnational corporations to exploit people has expanded across all borders. At the same time, governments everywhere are cutting education and health care, and dismantling social welfare programs while privatizing industries.

In the overdeveloped countries, women and children are being impoverished by the changing economy, which demands a more "flexible" labor force. Women are the first to be pushed out of well-paid, secure jobs and pushed into low-wage, low-security jobs where they're isolated and it's hard for them to organize, such as temp work, part-time jobs, and domestic work.

Taking Up the Slack

All this is being justified by a sexist backlash against women. Conservatives restrict access to abortion and make claims about "family values" based on an ideology that says women's first duty is to be housewives. Other work that women "choose" to do is unimportant compared to the job nature supposedly destined for them.

At the same time, the welfare state is being dismantled. Without a safety net, many women must work under any conditions for whatever they can get, just to survive. "Workfare" programs are growing all over the United States. In New York City, welfare recipients must pick up trash in parks and clean toilets in office buildings, with no safety gear or winter coats—or even adequate child care—simply to be eligible for their welfare checks of a few hundred dollars a month. Private companies will soon be able to take advantage of these nearly free workers.

Like poor women in the US, women in underdeveloped countries are being used more and more as a source of cheap labor. Since the 1970s, when it became clear that the boom period following World War II was over, large corporations have moved their factories from the industrialized nations to not-so-industrialized countries in Southeast Asia and Latin America, where low labor costs can keep profits high and prices in the overdeveloped countries low.

Women as Natural Resources

Export Processing Zones illustrate the almost unlimited power and privileges that transnational corporations have when locating their industries in the Third World. Poor countries with high debt to international banks set aside land especially for factories producing goods for the international market. The local governments provide sewers, electricity, ports, runways, tax holidays, police protection, and the most valuable resource of all—women’s cheap labor. At least 70% of workers in Export Processing Zones are women.

These women workers perform the most tedious, eye- and back-straining work, for over 50 hours a week, to get only a few dollars a day. Despite the fact that many households are headed by women, development plans define women as housewives, not as workers. Their wage is a “supplementary income” to what the male “breadwinner” supposedly brings home.

Asian women are advertised by their governments, who describe their “nimble fingers” to foreign investors. Women are assumed to sew “naturally;” and textile manufacturers claim their labor does not require any learned skills. Their labor is an “income generating activity,” not work for which they deserve a living wage. Many women do “piecework,” such as lace-making, at home in what is presumed to be their spare time, for what is described as ‘a little extra money.’

Powerful transnational companies seek to control almost every aspect of the lives of their female employees. Women factory workers often live in dormitories or in the plant itself. American and Japanese electronics factory owners in Malaysia only hire women younger than 25, who are “just working until they get married.” These young women are under pressure from their families not to try to organize unions, and to marry in order to escape the factories. But they are sexualized by factory owners who hold beauty pageants where women workers can compete to be the company’s beauty queen.

Women are sexually exploited by the tourist industries of many underdeveloped countries, which rely heavily on prostitution. The government of Thailand began offering prostitution to US servicemen on “rest and relaxation” from the Vietnam War. The World Bank advised Thailand to develop tourism in the 1970s, after the US had pulled out of Vietnam. The Thai government passed the Tourism Promotion Law, and since then tourism has grown to be the country’s largest industry besides manufacturing. Wealthy businessmen from both East and West come to “exercise their social and economic power by pursuing their sexual fantasies without guilt,” in the words of feminist Than Dam-Troug. The police force protects owners of sex establishments and serves to punish and control women sex workers.

Like women everywhere, Third World women resist policies that are meant to control their reproductive capacities. Unlike most women in overdeveloped countries, however, they are not being told to go home and have babies. Since women in underdeveloped countries are producing food for the rest of the world for wages below their own subsistence level, there is not enough food for their children.

And Getting Blamed to Boot

The idea that “overpopulation” causes Third World poverty is similar to the anti-welfare argument that poor women having too many kids is what causes poverty in the United States. Women are blamed and women are punished for a situation that is bad for them to begin with.

Governments asking for loans from the World Bank are pressured to take action to reduce “fertility,” a notion that conceives of women as mindless breeders. Women, especially in India and Bangladesh, have been used as guinea pigs for new contraception devices. In Puerto Rico, one third of the women were sterilized, many without the knowledge that the procedure was irreversible. Women all over the world bear the brunt of cutbacks and austerity measures. The International Monetary Fund requires governments in debt to keep wages down and cut health and education budgets so they can pay back their loans with interest. Often they can only do this without serious riots breaking out because women find ways to stretch cooking oil and kerosene, soothe male partners and family members, find more work in the casual sector, and take care of children without medical care.

Single mothers everywhere are punished for living outside heterosexual marriage. But some women have more choices than others. Many middle-class women in Western countries who fought for the right to work outside the home now hire nannies to take care of their kids because there is no child care in the workplace. Many of the nannies are immigrants whose children live far away. In contrast to the power wielded by transnational corporations across national borders, immigrant nannies are faced with immigration laws that make it hard for them to get fair working conditions.

Feminism Without Borders

White Western feminists have often assumed that issues important to them are shared by all women, and so have ignored struggles by women of color, poor women, and Third World women. In order to build a feminist movement that will fight for better lives for women all over the world, feminists with relative privilege must have a clear picture of the global system of capitalist patriarchy that exploits us all.

When women organize, we break down the isolation between us and learn more about our own and each other's lives. Feminists need to expand our solidarity to a global level, to create networks across borders and oceans between feminist groups like GABRIELA, which fights sex tourism in the Philippines, Jamaican single mothers confronting the IMF, and workfare workers organizing in New York City. We need to build a movement that will be strong enough to end the exploitation of women in our own communities, and in every community where women make our clothes, produce our food, and put together our stereotypes.

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