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Women

Women's oppression in globalization

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The existence of women's oppression pre-dates not only globalization, but also capitalism itself. Moreover, due to its specific characteristics, the consequences that globalization exerts on it are not a foregone or one-sided conclusion. Globalization implies an unequal and different extension of capitalist production relations, in the north and the south alike. Today, women are at the heart of this process. To grasp its complexity, we must review the specific nature of gender oppression, and the particular means by which it interplays with the capitalist mode of production.

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Gender oppression cuts through all other forms of domination and exploitation in human societies. In particular, it extends beyond class conflicts, but it also cuts through all collective social realities - ethnic, national, religious, local. Moreover, it is closely tied up with the private sphere, individual and daily life, making awareness of its existence and the emergence of a collective emancipatory project particularly difficult. Finally, it is a socially constructed oppression, producing an ideological representation of differences often perceived as natural, and confined to the field of biology or psychology.

Furthermore, although gender oppression did not emerge with private ownership of the means of production or capitalism, [1] it has linked up dynamically with the different stages of the latter. Capitalism implies a growing separation of producers from the means of production, and a separation between the spheres of production of goods and reproduction of the labour force. This gave rise to what is known today as "housework" in its current form: tasks falling primarily and at times exclusively on women's shoulders.

So, neoliberal globalization must be examined as a particular stage in capitalism as it relates to gender-based oppression. By bringing about a forced march of capitalist production relations and the destabilization of former hierarchies, especially in the dominated countries, at a speed never before encountered, the capitalist mode of production never stops engendering itself.

This is truer still if we take into account the sexual and social division of labour on which gender oppression is based. The capitalist means of production benefits from free reproduction of the labour force to increase the rate of surplus value. But at the same time, it has a vital need to have a reserve army of labour at its disposal, so it can extend wage work massively at any time, "forming a flexible labour market, on the international level, in which women occupy a strategic opposition in terms of their position both through their insertion both in wage labour and the informal sector is on the agenda" (Hirata and Le Doaré, 1998).

The question of the consequences of globalization on the oppression of women is at the heart of this contradiction. So, we can make the following observations:

- ▶ because there is a sexual and social division of labour, the consequences of neoliberal globalization on men and women are not the same;
- ▶ simultaneously, neoliberal globalization cannot take the blame for all cases of heightened oppression of women in the contemporary world. Some of these have much more complex and often far older causes.

- ▶ Finally, due to its very nature, neoliberal globalization causes upheavals and destabilises prior social relationships and the traditional forms of domination.

We must understand that these trends are aspects of the same contradictory and dialectical process.

Liberalization and structural adjustment: increased inequalities

Liberal globalization - and the economic policies implementing it - are contributing to stepping up the super-exploitation and oppression of women, in most cases. Throughout the world, we are observing the feminization of poverty. In the North, women make up the majority of poor workers, underemployed and unable to survive on their wages. This situation, which has existed for a long time in the English-speaking countries, appeared several years ago in France with the extension of part-time work, most of which is done by women. Women also make up the bulk of unemployed workers, whatever their age and skill level.

They are also the first group affected by structural adjustment strategies and economic liberalization, in many ways. They are affected since they bear the primary burden for reproducing the labour force. Measures partially socializing these tasks are under attack: elimination of day care centres in the Eastern bloc, privatization of schools and health care systems in the South, decline in quality and increased costs for all heretofore public systems, such as access to tap water, electricity, public transport, elimination of subsidies for basic needs. Women are the first to pay for these measures entailing harsher living conditions and a significant increase in the free labour they must perform. They also suffer the consequences of their subordinate position within the family: when education and medical care have to be paid for in the Third World, girls are taken out of school first, or first deprived of vaccinations.

Women are also affected due to their specific place in the labour market: layoffs in the public sector, education, health, and the civil service, remove a lot of the jobs they held beforehand.

Finally, they are disadvantaged due to the systematic discrimination they encounter in terms of farm production: access to land, credit and training. The decline in subsistence agriculture with respect to export crops is a catastrophe for women. They face threats in terms of food security, access to land (men leave women the least fertile land), a consequent increase in their workload both on the land to which they have usufruct rights and sometimes on their husband's land, in particular in Sub-Saharan Africa. More generally, in all the rural regions of the Third World, their subordinate position in the social division of agricultural labour means that capitalist modernization of agriculture has worsened their situation, whether in terms of access to land or jobs, income, workload and control over the latter (Agarwal 1985).

Finally, the extension on the world scale of commodity relations reinforces the system of prostitution and other forms of human trafficking (new forms of slavery) of which women are, of course, the foremost victims.

Contradictory changes

The contradictory nature of the relations between globalization and the oppression of women seem even clearer in Third World economies. Indeed, beyond the diversity of societies and situations, we can observe that the upheavals due to globalization have occurred following the development strategies that, from the 1950s to the 1970s, were completely blind to women's place, in particular in farming. Training programmes and land reform only targeted

"heads of households". These changes also played a part in destabilizing social structures that were far from the "original" state of these societies. They had undergone in-depth changes due to colonization and were reconfigured by capitalism. Nevertheless, they called upon tradition to justify certain forms of persistent subjection of women in the family, the community and so on.

Almost everywhere, we have observed an increase in the rate of women's labour force participation over the last thirty years, even in Third World regions such as North Africa where it was traditionally low (Talahite 1998). This growth in labour force participation, in wage work and the informal sector alike, generally follows direct foreign investment flows oriented towards export industries (Treillet 1999). Many studies, in particular the study carried out by the Gedisst [2] on the "paradoxes of globalization" did note an increase in paid skilled (industrial) employment opportunities for women in certain Asian or Latin American countries (Hirata and Le Doaré 1998). However, "this new reality is contradictory": even in jobs relating to new technologies (computer systems, electronics) and which are not limited to assembly work, "women are limited to the worst maintenance service work". Trade liberalization in different countries, in particular in Latin America, led to the bankruptcy of many industries protected beforehand by customs barriers and mostly employing men, while labour-intensive export industries had first hired women. The workers in these industries are subjected to all the worst aspects of super-exploitation: unhealthy and often hazardous working conditions, not counting sexist violence, harassment, and often interference with their private lives.

We can also observe the contradictory effects of the extension of individual property rights to farmland; in Africa, and in Mexico with the reform of the Ejido [3] (Katz 1999). In effect, this development, of which we have seen the overall negative consequences described above, sometimes impinges on certain rights that had been granted to women by custom, but always subordinate to the whims of men or male community-based authorities. We find the same contradictory aspect in situations of economic and social crisis. A study of the consequences of the Asian crisis in 1997-98 in the Philippines (Lim 2000) shows that this brought about a general impoverishment of the population, a greater increase in the hours of paid and unpaid employment among women than among men and a growth in the number of women working in the informal sector. But it also meant unemployment growing more rapidly among men than among women, due to the very segregation of the labour market in which women are over represented in the informal sector and in service and commercial jobs, less affected by the crisis.

Sometimes, on the contrary, women's jobs are the first to experience the consequences of reversal of growth. The garment industry in the Philippines was hard-hit by the WTO's elimination of import quotas. In many cases, the development of export industries, in particular in electronics, led to the expulsion of women: production units became more capital and technology intensive, and began to prefer hiring men.

Finally, at times transnational capital can benefit from tradition. This is what we have observed in recent years with the growth of subcontracting which develops work in the home, supposedly allowing women to simultaneously take charge of "their own" household tasks and child-rearing in places where there are no day care centres and sometimes not any schools, and in societies where women were traditionally confined to the home, as in South Asia. This allows for a reconciliation of the capitalist order and the patriarchal order, with the latter given the responsibility of ensuring industrial discipline on behalf of the former.

Potentialities for struggle

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Despite all of this, the elements of instability brought about by globalization can contribute to a change in the status of women in the society, albeit to a limited extent. Many examples have shown that this is the case in Latin America

when women are the only family members who can keep a paid job. In India, the expansion of footwear industries in a town in Tamil Nadu since the 1980s, drawing mostly upon young female workers, has led to an upheaval in terms of traditions: women working alongside men and a social mixing, challenging the caste system, greater freedom of movement in the public space for young women who have thereby succeeded in delaying their marriage age, or no longer consider that they must necessarily marry (Venou 1999).

But above all, the massive entry of women into the wage labour force, even if it is flexible and casualised, and more generally in paid economic activity outside the domestic space, opens up to them, in these very difficult economic conditions, the possibility to begin organising, to have their rights as women workers recognised. So, while even multinational firms are counting on the extension of subcontracting and work in the home to intensify the super-exploitation of women workers, in India, since the beginning of the 1970s, the Self-employed women's association (SEWA) has been striving to organise them and to win recognition of their employee status (Verschuur 2000). In Mexican maquiladoras, working women are taking part in the struggle for independent trade unionism (Valadez 1998). So there are two traps to be avoided while understanding the development of women's oppression under globalization: on the one hand, seeing a kind of linear, unconditional progress for women. This is the outlook of the World Bank that is making use of a gender perspective from a neo-liberal outlook (globalization provides greater opportunities to individuals) - while continuing to count on women's free labour to cushion the most brutal impacts of structural adjustment. It is just as important to avoid, on the other hand, a nostalgic view of traditional societies in the name of the struggle against imperialism and the commodification of the world, while glossing over their fundamentally oppressive aspects for women. To get out of this dilemma, we must see women's struggles as an integral part of all facets of struggle against neo-liberal globalization.

This article first appeared in Critique Communiste, the theoretical journal of the LCR in France.

[1] See on this subject "Engels et l'émancipation des femmes", analysis by Josette Trat (1997) of Engels' work The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State and the debates on this subject.

[2] See on this subject "Engels et l'émancipation des femmes", analysis by Josette Trat (1997) of Engels' work The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State and the debates on this subject.

[3] Communal use of land, dating back to the revolution and challenged by the reform of article 27 of the Constitution, which in the early 1990s put these lands on the market.