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# GLOBALISATION, WOMEN AND WORK

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## What are we talking about?

An intelligent extra-terrestrial being coming to earth and hearing all the talk about globalisation might well conclude that humans have only just discovered that their planet is (roughly) spherical. Over the past ten years, the term is on everyone's lips and a huge 'anti-globalisation' movement has arisen, yet few people bother to define what globalisation means. We hear of 'neo-liberal globalisation', 'capitalist globalisation', and 'imperialist globalisation'; in fact, when we ask people what they mean by globalisation, they describe capitalism (a system based on the exploitation of workers and production for profit), imperialism (the political, economic and military domination over some states by others), and neo-liberalism (the policy of allowing the market to determine everything, including wage levels, healthcare, education, etc.). But if capitalism, imperialism and neo-liberalism can all be defined without reference to globalisation, shouldn't it be possible to define globalisation without reference to them? Surely it is. A reasonable definition would be the free movement of products, money, ideas and people around the globe. At present, the only major obstacles to such movement are national boundaries, so globalisation would mean the weakening or eventual elimination of those boundaries.

Why is there such passionate opposition to the undermining of national borders? A major development in the last several hundred years was the rise and consolidation of nation-states and nationalism, the ideology that all those who belong to the nation have a greater common interest than any group within it has with others outside. 'Imperialism and its World War' grew organically out of European nationalism, as Max Adler put it; the remaining portions of the earth were progressively divided up between competing empires and fought over in two world wars. The desire for freedom on the part of the colonised peoples led to independence movements and liberation struggles; the dominant culture meant that these movements and struggles too took the form of nationalism. There were dissenting views in the early twentieth century: for example, Rosa Luxemburg from oppressed Poland and Rabindranath Tagore from colonised India were bitter critics of 'national self-determination' and nationalism. But they were voices in the wilderness at a time when worship of The Nation was acquiring almost religious fervour.

The view of national boundaries as being 'natural' dates from this period. The only challenge to existing nations came from would-be nations claiming the right to 'national self-determination'. The idea that the earth always has been and always will be divided into nations was taken for granted, and with it, the idea that an

individual's highest duty is service to the nation. Culture, tradition, development, were all defined in national terms. Even class interests, which earlier had been seen as international, were trimmed to fit the shape of national borders. The women's movement valiantly resisted the trend at first, but later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century lost its internationalist edge.

It is in this context that (re)globalisation appears as something new. Arguably, the first manifesto of the return to globalisation is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, articulating the belief that the most basic rights of human beings cannot be different in different countries but have to be common for all peoples. Adopted by the UN on 10 December 1948, just one day after the Genocide Convention, there is an intrinsic connection between the two. Both are reactions to the horror of the Holocaust and World War II (including the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki), the ultimate barbarism which arises when the universality of human rights is denied. But prior to this, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), founded in 1919 to promote social justice and internationally recognised labour rights, had become the first specialised agency of the UN in 1946. And even earlier, the Geneva Conventions had been drawn up to regulate the conduct of nations during war – circumstances in which national legislation is obviously inadequate. Implicitly or explicitly, these treaties recognise that global regulation is necessary.

In subsequent decades, the UN would pass many covenants and conventions applying to the world as a whole. For example, in 1966 two covenants codifying the rights in the Universal Declaration were adopted by the General Assembly: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CPR Covenant) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR Covenant). The ILO played a role in drafting both, especially the latter. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. The International Labour Code of the ILO is a large and growing document. All these and similar developments can be seen as being at least partially a result of the efforts of those sections of the labour movement and women's movement which still stubbornly refuse to allow national boundaries to divide workers from workers or women from women.

## Capitalism, imperialism and globalisation

But what about the globalisation carried out by capitalism? That, of course, is not as old as humankind, although it is as old as capitalism itself, which arose out of global trade. As nations

began to form in Europe, states assisted their merchant class to compete with rivals by using their power to dominate parts of the world from which they sourced the commodities that were making them rich. Imperialism in its classic form flows from this history of commercial expansion. It helped extend the reach of capitalism to most parts of the world, but in a manner that served the interests of the imperial power. This process of expansion worked in different ways in different parts of the world: in some (such as Africa) it devastated local populations through the slave trade and forced labour, in others (the Americas and Australasia) it involved the outright extermination of the indigenous peoples. In general, however, the brutality typical of colonial regimes reflected the drive to forcibly create a labour force for the needs of capital, at considerable cost to the communities impacted by this. All of this involved a restricted kind of globalisation, first because the world economy created by imperialism was tightly partitioned between rival imperial powers, thus restricting the mobility of goods, capital and personnel; next because territories such as that of the former Soviet Union remained outside the system; and finally, because late industrialisers both within Europe and elsewhere (e.g. Japan, India) used protectionism to nurture their own infant industries.

The demand for the removal of barriers to the free movement of goods and capital from country to country comes from large firms – international or transnational corporations – whose scale of operations demands that the whole world be open to them. Financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, whose structure ensures that they are dominated by rich nations, have assisted in the process of opening up the world to international firms through the policies imposed on loan recipients. Yet the removal of trade barriers has become just as important to countries in the developing world. The former Soviet Union, India and China are examples of large economies that achieved an impressive degree of industrialisation while still largely insulated from the rest of the world, but they have found themselves seriously lagging behind technologically. Smaller nations – especially those whose economies have been distorted by colonialism – are even more obviously dependent on the world market. And while there has been no formal globalisation of the labour market, in practice vast numbers of migrant workers travel around the world seeking employment, and a large proportion of them are women.

A post-Soviet, truly global capitalism cannot function smoothly without commonly accepted rules, and while the richer, more powerful nations may try to push through their agendas in the regulatory bodies, they cannot afford to ignore the others without risking a breakdown of the entire effort. Anti-globalisers who want to scrap the World Trade Organisation (WTO), formed in January 1995 and correctly seen as a key institution of a globalised capitalism, never bother to spell out the alternative. As of now, the only alternatives are nationally isolated economies or bilateral trade agreements. National self-sufficiency converges with the xenophobic nationalist agenda of the far right (the RSS, the

backbone of India's fascist movement, was in the forefront of demonstrations against then WTO director-general Mike Moore in India in January 2000), and you don't have to be a genius to predict whose agenda will get priority when bilateral trade agreements are between developing and developed countries. This also creates the possibility of dirty deals (typical of the US) of the you-support-us-and-we'll-give-preference-to-your-exports type. Indeed, this is what was happening before the formation of the WTO and to some extent continues to happen today. But the existence of a multilateral regulatory body with a formal one-country-one-vote constitution at least makes it possible for developing countries to bargain collectively in setting the rules as well as getting them implemented. This explains why Third World countries, from giants like China to the poorest of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), have been queuing up to join the WTO. To say that poor countries should not join the WTO because rich countries have a stronger position within it is like saying that workers should not engage in collective bargaining because employers are stronger. Of course they are! But does that mean that workers should remain isolated as individuals? In solidarity lies strength, as workers have always known, and the weaker party needs collective bargaining more than the stronger one.

Without going into too much detail, we can list some of the ways in which globalised capitalism is different from imperialism. Imperialism involves military and/or political domination over territories by imperial states, while globalisation depends on real political autonomy among its participants. Imperial powers unilaterally dictate the rules in imperialism while globalisation would be unsustainable without regulation by multilateral bodies. Imperialism reflects the existence of strong nation-states and nationalism, while globalisation weakens both. The free and rapid movement of information which is made possible by information technology is a key component of globalisation but not of imperialism. Far from being a prime mover of globalisation, the USA under the Bush administration has been its greatest obstacle. Their bombing and invasion of Iraq was undertaken in clear opposition to the UN, a very imperfect multilateral body that the US had previously dominated completely. They have attempted to sabotage virtually every effort at multilateral global regulation – the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and Comprehensive (nuclear) Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions, the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Geneva Conventions, and have even been reluctant to abide by WTO regulations. In each case, their actions have been justified by national sovereignty (which they feel would be undermined by the inspection regimes of the CTBT and Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions as well as the ICC) or national interest (the invasion of Iraq in defiance of the UN Security Council, and flouting of the Geneva Conventions, Kyoto Protocol and WTO rules). In all these cases, the multilateral regulatory regime requisite for globalisation conflicts with the unilateral nature of US imperialism.

## Visible work, invisible work

It was in the 1970s that there began to be theories about the 'New International Division of Labour (NIDL)' and 'feminisation of the labour force', and these theories reflected real changes occurring globally. MNCs shifted large chunks of their more labour-intensive processes – electronic and automobile assembly, for example – to Third World countries, and the majority of new workers were women. According to ILO statistics, global employment almost doubled between 1965 and 1995, the bulk of the expansion was in the developing countries, and more than half the new recruits were women. For MNCs, this was a change of policy from the previous period when their manufacturing was largely in Western Europe and North America, although there had already been manufacturing units set up in some developing countries before the so-called NIDL; globalisation involved a more even spread of their manufacturing units around the world. These companies were driven not by nationalism but by the thirst for profit, and if that meant closing down plants in Europe or North America and shifting production and investment to the Third World, it was not a problem for them. But for workers – especially male workers - in the North, some of whom had done well in the previous period, it meant a loss of employment which was exacerbated by technological change. This was mitigated to some extent by the rise of new sources of employment, especially for women in the service sector. However, many of the new jobs were under much inferior employment conditions, and the overall effect in these countries, for both men and women, was a fairly sharp fall in income and labour standards.

For Third World workers who gained employment, conditions varied widely. A relatively small number in large-scale formal sector workplaces succeeded in unionising and winning good employment conditions. For example, the men and women in Bombay's pharmaceutical factories in the 1960s and 70s had secure jobs, good wages and decent working conditions, paid off-days, holidays and leave, and a large number of benefits and allowances, including three months' fully paid maternity leave and workplace creches for the pre-school children of women. But most were not so lucky. Much of the work in the garment industry, for example, was shifted to Free Trade Zones where unions were either explicitly banned by law, or in practice kept out by military-style security measures for the entire zone and severe penalties for any worker who so much as made a move towards organising. This has been the pattern in Sri Lanka, the Philippines and many Central American countries. In India and to some extent Pakistan, on the other hand, the dominant model has been extreme decentralisation of production through subcontracting to small units employing informal workers; many jobs have been shifted to this sector from the shrinking formal sector in recent years. Both models have been used to keep out unions, but the latter model has been more successful in the long term. Prolonged and persistent efforts to organise themselves in the large-scale, formal units of the FTZs by workers employed in them has in some cases yielded positive results, despite meeting

brutal resistance from employers and governments. Organising informal workers, on the other hand, has proved almost impossible. How can a worker seek redress when she is dismissed for trying to organise if she has no legal proof of having been employed in the first place? Denied the right to organise and bargain collectively, workers in both the FTZs and the informal sector have been subjected to extremely harsh employment conditions.

So on balance, are these women better off with or without employment? If you ask them, the answer will be clear. There is a saying that the only thing worse than being exploited by capital is *not* being exploited by capital, and paradoxical though it may seem, this is true. Dreaming of alternatives is fine, but it is also necessary to come to terms with reality, and in the capitalist world economy of today, especially in Third World countries without any social welfare system, having a job – *any* job – is better than having none. If workers continue to earn a pittance by working under dreadful conditions, it is because this is the only way in which they and their families can survive.

In the case of women, there is yet another reason why employment is important. I have asked many young women working in FTZs in Sri Lanka whether they would prefer it if their fathers or husbands earned enough to keep them at home, and the answer has invariably been 'No'. Naila Kabeer, who interviewed women garment workers in Bangladesh, received more or less the same reply. In our deeply patriarchal societies, being a breadwinner gives women a potential for empowerment which they otherwise don't have. Think of a young woman who doesn't want to be forced into marrying a man against her will, or a woman trying to escape from an abusive marriage. Without employment, the chances of escape would be virtually nil. And even if they do not wish to leave their homes, the *possibility* that they might do so gives them some bargaining power to demand greater freedom. Those who deplore the exploitative conditions under which these women work without seeing the even greater oppression they might suffer without those jobs see only part of the picture.

However, that part of the picture is very real, and certainly needs to be changed. Purely local and national struggles for unionisation and protective labour legislation have been undermined by the global mobility of capital, but globalisation has also created new ways of fighting for workers' rights. International trade union solidarity and coordinated campaigns, including the passing of new ILO Conventions, have in some cases succeeded in winning rights for workers engaged in local struggles. The ILO Core Conventions – protecting freedom of association, the right to organise and bargain collectively, freedom from forced and bonded labour, the abolition of child labour, and freedom from discrimination – were made mandatory in all member states of the ILO in 1998. The right to a safe and healthy workplace and freedom from sexual harassment can also be seen as basic human rights, although they are not included in the core conventions. Consumer campaigns in Western Europe and North America have succeeded in imposing Codes of Conduct guaranteeing basic workers' rights in companies

supplying major retailers and brand name companies, and while the problem of implementing these codes on a large scale has not been solved, there are individual cases where workers' rights have been defended and won through such campaigns. The issue of including a workers' rights clause in multilateral trade agreements has been a contentious one, yet if this is achieved it would at the very least establish the right of workers producing for export to organise unions and bargain collectively.

Ideally, all these rights should also be available to informal workers. But there is a major problem in winning them so long as these workers have no proof of employment and are not even registered as workers. One of the major demands of women homeworkers in the garment industry in Bombay is recognition of their status as workers and proof of employment. They suggest various ways in which this can be done: registration by the government, identity cards, attendance diaries and pay slips, for example. Basically, there should be a record of who works for whom and for how long, no matter how temporary, seasonal or casual the employment is. For contract workers, there is an additional complication, because the labour contractor acts as a middleman between worker and employer without taking on the responsibilities of an employer. In principle, whoever pays the worker's wages should be regarded as the employer – i.e., there should be no intermediary between employer and worker. In most cases, the contractor should be registered only as a recruitment agent and paid a commission by the employer, who should then pay the workers directly. But in some cases – cleaning contractors, for example – the contractor could be registered as the employer. With the advent of computers, the idea of keeping a record of all employment becomes quite feasible.

Once informal labour has been formalised by registration, it would be possible to introduce additional measures to ensure a maximum amount of regularisation of employment. For example, the Contract Labour Act in India makes it illegal to employ contract workers for permanent or perennial jobs; if instead of attempting to 'reform' this law into nothingness the government were to extend it to all forms of irregular employment (e.g. temporary, casual and seasonal as well as contract labour) and enforce it, this would regularise large sections of the labour force. This does not mean that there should be job security in some absolute sense, only that so long as a job remains in existence, the same worker should be employed to do it, unless incompetence or wrongdoing can be proved. With a record of all employment being kept, it would become much more obvious when unfair labour practices are being used, such as creating artificial breaks in employment, terminating one worker and employing another simply in order not to make the first worker permanent, or moving production to another location when workers unionise. If, in addition, it is stipulated that irregular workers have to be paid the same wages as permanent workers doing comparable work, with pro rata facilities (like paid off-days, holidays and crèches) and benefits (healthcare, retirement benefits, bonus, etc.), the temptation for employers to use irregular workers in the place of regular ones would be much reduced. Their argument for using

irregular workers is flexibility, and if this is the real reason, there should be no objection to spending as much on these workers as on permanent ones.

However, if these improvements are made only in some countries, there is a danger that capital (including capital originating in that country) will relocate to other countries where standards are lower. This has already happened in many cases – for example, Hong Kong and South Korea – where workers have fought for and won better conditions only to find themselves jobless when production moves to another country. Therefore it would be crucially important that this is an international campaign, coordinating local action in different countries and also putting pressure on international bodies to enforce these measures globally. In other words, so far as visible (i.e. waged) work is concerned, the appropriate response to capitalist globalisation is a struggle to globalise workers' rights, especially basic human rights (the ILO Core Conventions) and parental rights, without which women are almost always at a disadvantage. But this brings us to the issue of the unwaged caring work in the home which occupies a large part of most women's lives, and which remained invisible to economics until feminists pointed out how crucial it is in any society.

### 'They want warfare, we want welfare!'

This slogan, popular on anti-war demonstrations, encapsulates the second major element in a women's global agenda. Founder of International Women's Day Clara Zetkin took it for granted that women workers' rights and opposition to war went hand-in-hand, and March 8 is, among other things, the anniversary of the Russian women workers' strike, demanding 'bread and peace', that brought down Tsarism in 1917. Women's opposition to war is not surprising if we keep in mind the current gender division of labour. Years of labour and love are required to nurture a human being from birth to adulthood, yet a bullet or bomb can wipe out this labour of love in an instant. Over and above the emotional loss caused by the death of loved ones in war, there is the additional destruction of the products of women's work on a massive scale. But opposition to war cannot be confined within national borders. Every conflict has at least two sides, and almost always they are between opposing nationalisms, whether these are within the same country or between two countries. In order to be successful, a peace movement has to be international.

The other side of this coin is social recognition and equal sharing of the unwaged caring work currently performed mainly by women, which implies its inclusion in the measurement of GDP and very definite measures to support and assist those who carry it out. For example, shorter working hours, part-time work under decent conditions and parental leave are vitally necessary for parents with babies, and accessible high-quality childcare also becomes desirable at a slightly later stage. Recognising the social value of this kind of work means that people who are engaged in full-time care of the very young, very old or chronically ill need to be provided by

society with a livelihood as well as assistance in their work. Provision of free health care and a good education are yet another way in which society can contribute to this type of work and reduce the burden on individuals.

The role of women in caring work explains why they have always been prominent in the peace movement, taking part in Women in Black movements, anti-war demonstrations, and cross-border solidarity actions. Women have played a major role in the anti-nuclear movement and campaign against landmines, and inputs from women were crucially important in shaping the treaty of the International Criminal Court, especially in getting recognition for crimes against women as elements in war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. However, we have not been so active in following through the budgetary implications of our agenda. As working women, we make a substantial contribution to the creation of wealth; indeed, if the unwaged component is taken into account, women still contribute more than men, although things are slowly changing, with men taking a greater part in household work. We therefore have a right to have both information and some control over what is done with 'government' money which is, after all, obtained by taxation. Reallocating money currently spent on huge military budgets to health, social security and education would simultaneously reduce the risk of death or injury in war and improve chances of life and wellbeing for large sections of the working population. Once again, this effort has much greater chances of success if it is global. Women have in fact opposed IMF and World Bank policies which reduce or discontinue welfare expenditure, but we could also take more positive steps, for example to campaign for implementation of ILO Conventions limiting working hours, providing parental leave (not just for women but also for men, otherwise the traditional gender division of labour is reinforced), and providing social welfare benefits.

### **Why anti-globalisation is against the interests of working women**

An early opponent of globalisation wrote that 'the hardest battle would have to be fought, not against hostile nations, but against international capital'. That was Hitler, in *Mein Kampf*. Opposition to international (or foreign) capital has always been a defining feature of fascism, and perhaps the worst result of adopting 'anti-globalisation', with its explicit attack on international capital and implicit endorsement of nationalism, is that it has legitimised and reinforced the xenophobic agenda of the far Right, helping it to grow in one country after another. This is *not* a case of the Right

cleverly co-opting the language of the Left, but of the Left stupidly adopting the rhetoric and ideology of the Right. We cannot fight against fascism and its particularly monstrous attack on women if we share its unquestioning belief in state sovereignty: that is the fundamental truth grasped by the women's groups behind the International Initiative for Justice in Gujarat. Moreover, a nationalist outlook makes it impossible to fight effectively against imperialism (expansionist nationalism) and war (competitive militarised nationalism), because at bottom, the two sides share the same ideology.

From the standpoint of women workers, especially those in the Third World, the 'anti-globalisation' agenda makes no sense. If successful, it would simply deprive them of a large proportion of their employment opportunities as well as the possibility of improving employment conditions through global solidarity and coordination. Moreover, this agenda ignores women's interest in world peace, which by its nature has to be global. A much more sensible objective would be concerted action to shape the global order in accordance with a women's agenda for justice and equity as well as caring and nurturing. This would in the first instance mean working for an extension of the reach of international law, and for democratic institutions of global governance. Since capital is inherently global, anti-globalisation can only split workers along national lines, making their resistance to capital weaker. Realising this, our forefathers and foremothers in the revolutionary communist movement exhorted workers of all countries to unite in order to overthrow capitalism. Today, even the short-term goal of resisting neo-liberal policies cannot be achieved without international coordination. And in the long-term, capitalism will continue to survive so long as workers' solidarity is broken by nationalism and other divisive ideologies.

Can a socialist feminist vision of an ideal world include national boundaries maintained by nationalism, with its potential for developing into fascism, imperialism and war? Surely not! Given how much barbaric violence - against women especially - has been perpetrated around the issue of national borders in South Asia (during Partition and the national liberation struggle of Bangladesh, in Northeast India, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, etc.), shouldn't we be arguing for the removal of immigration and trade barriers in the SAARC region rather than fighting against the dissolution of those barriers by globalisation? If capitalism is acting as midwife at the birth of a borderless world, shouldn't we be ready to nurture the new arrival and imbue it with our values of justice and love instead of trying to push it back into the womb of history? ■

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