

Women as Workers and Reproductive Labour



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Published by **Iva Valley Books**

2nd Floor, Labour House

Central Area-Abuja.

07037163465



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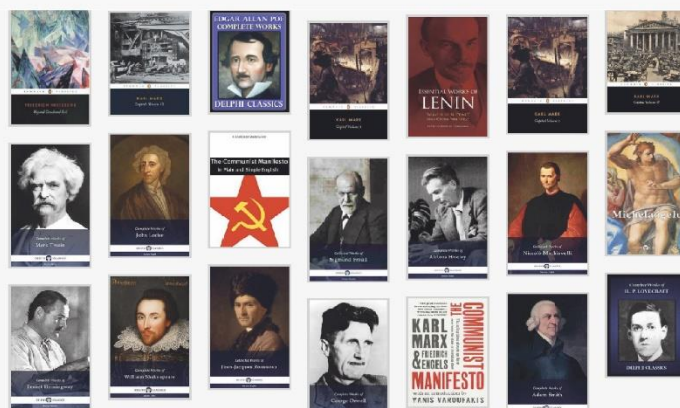
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Introduction

Globalization has resulted in record numbers of women entering the wage-labour force globally. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), “the share of women in wage and salaried work grew during the past ten years from 42.9 per cent in 1996 to 47.9 per cent in 2006” (ILO 2007). So around half of women are now workers. The same report noted that women continue to be an underprivileged section of the labour force. This pamphlet examines two major reasons why this is the case: namely, the gender division of labour and sexual harassment and violence against women. As a result of these practices, the constitution of women workers as a cheap and flexible labour force is almost universal, and this creates serious problems for the labour movement. The very fact that this division between male and female workers exists makes it harder to build working-class solidarity and arrive at a common strategy to improve employment conditions and confront the challenges of globalization. Putting this issue on the agenda and working out ways to tackle it is an important part of a global strategy for labour and for socialists to make trade unions more effective.

This pamphlet is based on the specific experience of trade unionists in India, but most of the lessons are relevant for Nigeria. This pamphlet can be used by trade unionists, men as well as women, to try and ensure that their trade unions take

the issue of women workers seriously. This should strengthen trade unions and improve the position of all their members.

Capital and Gender

Most feminists trying to explain the subordination of women under capitalism have concluded that capitalism does not create this subordination, although it certainly uses it to its own advantage (Mackintosh 1981; Himmelweit 1984). Although individual capitalists may have prejudices against women doing particular kinds of work, for capital as such it does not matter whether workers are male or female, so long as they produce surplus value at the maximum possible rate. As Engels observed, in 1839 more women than men were employed as factory operatives in England, with devastating consequences for the family:

The employment of women at once breaks up the family; for when the wife spends twelve or thirteen hours every day in the mill, and the husband works the same length of time there or elsewhere, what becomes of the children? . . . That the general mortality among young children must be increased by the employment of the mothers is self-evident, and is placed beyond doubt by notorious facts. . . . The use of narcotics to keep children still is fostered by this infamous system.¹ (Engels 1975, 436–438)

In other words, capital prefers to employ women if they are cheaper and more flexible than men. If and when they become more expensive (by winning maternity benefits, for example) and less flexible (winning the right to refuse shift-work or overtime because of domestic responsibilities), men will be employed for the same occupations or formal women workers will be replaced by informal ones. This is because men have no legal claim to concessions for domestic labour and informal women workers can be dismissed if they demand any. It is not capital that has an interest in sustaining the existing gender division of labour in the workplace: it is comfortable with the situation described by Engels. The two main reasons why there is discrimination against women in waged work (and they are linked to each other) seem to be the domestic division of labour, which is in one form or another almost universal, and the strategies by male workers to exclude women from occupations that are regarded as being more skilled or prestigious (cf. Cockburn 1985). Both these tendencies can be found in Nigeria and across the Global South.

Sexual harassment at work is simply one expression of the more general violence against women in society, but its occurrence in the workplace may be aimed at discouraging women from entering employment. This is very evident, for example, in the film *North Country*, a fictionalized account of a real case, *Jenson v. Eveleth Taconite Co.*, where a woman worker brought a class-action

lawsuit against a mining company in the United States for failing to protect her and her co-workers from sexual harassment. Even where the aim is not to exclude women from the workforce, sexual harassment makes employment unpleasant or even unbearable for many women. It can thus be seen, at least in part, as a form of discrimination that is almost always directed specifically against women. It has also been described as “the most common and least discussed occupational health hazard for women” and can cause “depression, fatigue, headaches, sleeplessness, hostility, inability to concentrate and deterioration of personal relationships” (LRD 1996, 13). Paradoxically, legislation aimed at protecting women from sexual harassment, such as a ban on night work for women, can become an additional reason for discrimination against women.

Informal Employment: Contrasting Strategies to Deal with Unwaged Work

Informalizing employment in order to avoid accommodating women with family responsibilities has a long history:³ “A historical examination of women’s casualised work questions the assumption . . . that ‘flexibility’ is a modern invention; the supposedly ‘new’ forms of production actually have very old precedents” (Rowbotham 1994, 159). In India,

the annual note on the working of the UP (Uttar Pradesh) maternity Act during 1938 admits that many women workers were dismissed immediately after the Act was passed. . . . Similar is the conclusion of a . . . study by the International Labour Office: “Women fail to file claims . . . because they fear such an application may be followed by dismissal. In some cases, women workers are unable to prove completion of the requisite period of service because their employers have not kept the requisite records.” (Punekar 1950, 33)

Decades later, employers were using the same methods against women workers in garment factories and sweatshops. They were paid less than men for the same work, dismissed when they got pregnant, and rarely got their jobs back afterward. In the textile industry, women in the informal power-loom sector worked more than eight hours per day, six days a week, working night shifts on alternate weeks (Baud 1983). If this grueling schedule was not compatible with their domestic responsibilities, they had to leave. Not surprisingly, most of the women employed in this sector were young, had no children, and had other women in the family doing the housework. The fact that their employment was informal allowed their employers to ignore the domestic responsibilities of their women workers.

Women working at home provided a contrasting model. Here the site of waged and unwaged work was the same, allowing the women to intersperse finishing

operations such as thread trimming and button stitching with childcare and other household tasks. Given their living conditions, it was essential that at least one person had to be at home in the daytime. They lived in chawls and bastis (poor quality urban houses) without internal toilets or water supply; in Lower Parel, the water in the shared taps was available only from 3:00 to 5:30 p.m., which meant that women not only had to do as much of their washing as possible in this period but also had to collect and store enough water to last until the following afternoon. Homeworkers and housewives did not suffer the same sense of isolation as they did in Western countries—for example, they could sit on their doorsteps and chat as they did their homework and meet at the water taps when they were on—but their domestic workload was huge.⁴

Home working may sound like an ideal arrangement for women with domestic responsibilities, but it is not. The low piece rates resulted in girls being drawn into helping with the waged work; thus waged work interfered with homemaking, which ideally should provide children with an environment conducive to pursuing their education. Conversely, constant interruptions for household tasks meant that women could do less waged work, and therefore earned less, since the work was piece rated. “It’s difficult to make money working at home when you’ve kiddies. I much preferred the evening shift, when my husband would have the kiddies and I could go to work and get on with the job without being interrupted” (Allen and Wolkowitz 1986, 25). These difficulties were also evident among beedi workers (who produce hand-rolled cigarettes), where taking care of children in a hazardous working environment was an even greater problem (Hensman 2000, 251).

The irregularity of work meant that sometimes the women had no work to do, while at other times, “we have to work flat out to meet the deadline— if we don’t, we won’t be given work the next time.” Thus the idea that homework gave the women more flexibility was largely an illusion, because they could not afford to turn down the offer of work, even if it entailed working “overtime,” for fear of not getting work in the future. Nor could it be assumed that their earnings were unimportant for family survival: some had started work when their husbands lost their jobs in the textile mills in the early 1980s and were the main breadwinners. Of course, when there was no work they did get more leisure time, but it came at a price: a loss of earnings. Thus informality offered women two options: either casual outwork or full-time work without any concessions to domestic labour.

Globalization expanded women’s informal employment in Nigeria, and in India: “New opportunities for women have emerged in foreign exchange earning export industries like garment, leather, food processing and electronic goods, but they are subject to occupational health hazards and oppressive work conditions. Export oriented industries . . . are seekers of cheap labour and women do

constitute cheap labour” (Bajpai 1996, 72). It was partly women’s domestic role that constituted them as cheap labour.

Tackling Sexual Harassment at the Workplace

In 2002, the European Parliament agreed on a legal definition of sexual harassment as “any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct” with the purpose of violating a person’s dignity, in particular when creating a “hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment” (LRD 2003, 83). The situation in Nigeria, as in India, varies widely. In workplaces where there is a well-established union with a strong presence of women and a culture of respect for women, sexual harassment is virtually outlawed. Conversely, it is rampant in the informal sector. Nor are educated and qualified women exempt.

A university professor accused of sexually harassing female college students, escapes institutional censure. A high-ranking police officer publicly slaps a senior IAS officer on her backside and continues to enforce the law unscathed by her complaint. A village level development worker advocating the cause against child marriage is sexually harassed. When authorities fail to heed her complaints she is gang-raped. Female resident doctors are told by an inquiry committee that the sexual affronts made to them by Head of Department were really methods of “discipline”; in short, as the case of Theresa Lehmann v. Toys 'R' Us in the Supreme Court of New Jersey, 1993, put it, sexual harassment was routinely used to discredit a woman “by treating her as a sexual object rather than as a credible co-worker”. (Kapur 1996, 95–96)

It was women’s rights groups rather than trade unions that catalysed a breakthrough by helping Bhanwari Devi (the social worker who had been gang-raped in Rajasthan for trying to stop a child marriage) and her colleagues to pursue the case legally, as a result of which the High Court in 1993 ruled that it was a case of “gangrape which was committed out of vengeance.” Women’s groups also filed a petition in the Supreme Court, under the name “Visakha,” asking the court to issue directions concerning sexual harassment at the workplace, as a result of which the Supreme Court in 1997 issued the Visakha Guidelines based upon provisions in the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which the Indian government had signed and ratified (as Nigeria did in 1985). The National Commission for Women, in consultation with women’s and civil-rights groups, took up the task of formulating a law on sexual harassment (Desai 2005).

A Sexual Harassment Bill was prepared by 2005 but was then subjected to numerous revisions, and all of its progressive features were diluted or removed in the 2007 version. The Bill was finally passed into law in 2013, but does not apply to the army or agricultural workers. The clarification in the definition of “sexual harassment” that it was the reasonable perception of the woman that

certain conduct was sexually coloured and unwelcome was deleted. The section indicating that employers have to take responsibility for ensuring compliance with the law and can be punished for failing to do so was also deleted. However, in the case of the Hewlett-Packard call-center employee Pratibha Srikant Murthy, who was raped and murdered in 2005 by a cab driver contracted by the company, the Supreme Court in 2008 ruled that the director at that time, Som Mittal, was liable and could be prosecuted, since he was responsible for her safety and protection (ET 2008).

In the section on Rules of Evidence, sensitivity to the complainant, non-permissibility of evidence based on the aggrieved woman's character and personal/sexual history, and the need to take note of socioeconomic conditions and hierarchy were all deleted. Features such as issuing interim orders to protect the woman and her supporters during the enquiry and afterward, even if the complaint was dismissed, and allowing the woman to take action under other laws, such as those on rape and sexual assault, were also missing. Worst of all, a section was added stating that if the allegation of sexual harassment was found to be false, the woman could be punished! Furthermore, there was provision for the woman to withdraw the complaint, thereby providing a space for harassment and pressure on the woman to do so. Justice Verma, the author of the Visakha Guidelines, said that if the bill was to be passed in this form, the bill would “kill the spirit of Visakha”, this is indeed what happened (New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI) 2007b; Bhaduri 2007).

An agreed-on text had not been put before parliament even by late 2009. The struggle to push through and implement legislation that could protect women from sexual harassment in the workplace continued, giving trade unions too an opportunity to intervene. The NTUI felt that “this also provides an excellent opportunity for trade unions to address issues of patriarchy and sexism within their own formations” and to uphold “women's rights and working class unity” (NTUI 2007b).

The Production of Labour Power

Tackling the gender division of labour in the home requires an examination of the production of labour power. Given the centrality of labour power to capitalism— since as the only commodity that can produce surplus value, and therefore profit, it is the sine qua non of accumulation—it is somewhat surprising that Marx nowhere describes its production. He comes closest to it in the chapter on “The Sale and Purchase of Labour-Power”:

Given the existence of the individual, the production of labour-power consists in his reproduction of himself or his maintenance. For his maintenance he requires a certain

quantity of the means of subsistence. Therefore the labour-time necessary for the production of labour-power is the same as that necessary for the production of those means of subsistence. . . . If the owner of labour-power works today, tomorrow he must again be able to repeat the same process in the same conditions as regards health and strength. His means of subsistence must therefore be sufficient to maintain him in his normal state as a working individual. . . . The owner of labour-power is mortal. If then his appearance in the market is to be continuous, and the continuous transformation of money into capital assumes this, the seller of labour-power must perpetuate himself “in the way that every living individual perpetuates himself, by procreation.” . . . Hence the sum of means of subsistence necessary for the production of labour-power must include the means necessary for the worker’s replacements, i.e. his children. . . . The costs of education vary according to the degree of complexity of the labour-power required. These expenses . . . form a part of the total value spent in producing it. The value of labour-power can be resolved into the value of a definite quantity of the means of subsistence. (Marx 1976, 274–276)

Marx gives examples of means of subsistence like food and fuel, which need to be replaced daily, while others, like clothes and furniture, can be purchased at longer intervals. But that is all. Unlike his detailed descriptions of the production of other commodities, here there is no description of a labour process, nor even a mention of instruments of production (such as a stove, pots and pans, broom, bucket, and mop). Just raw materials— means of subsistence—and the finished product: labour power. The implicit assumption is that only a process of individual consumption is required to convert those means of subsistence into labour power. Yet the worker would not be maintained in his (or her) “normal state as a working individual”— nor be replaced when he (or she) could no longer work—unless somebody carried the raw materials and instruments of production home from the market or shops, cooked the food and washed up after the meal, dusted, swept, mopped floors and washed clothes, fed the baby, changed it, gave it a bath, and so on.

The home is therefore a site of both individual consumption and production. ⁵ Both are necessary for the production of labour power, and Marx’s failure to identify and analyse the latter has been attributed to his “patriarchal position” (Weinbaum 1978, 43). In fact, Marx’s confusion of production with individual consumption leads to bizarre contradictions. For example, he writes of domestic labour that “the largest part of society, that is to say the working class, must incidentally perform this kind of labour for itself; but it is only able to perform it when it has laboured ‘productively’. It can only cook meat for itself when it has produced a wage with which to pay for the meat” (Marx 1963, 161).

If we generalize this proposition, it would state that until a commodity has been sold, it cannot be produced. But it should be obvious that labour power especially cannot be sold for the first time until hundreds of hours of labour time have been

spent on its production. As Marx recognizes elsewhere, “its exchange value, like that of every other commodity, is determined before it goes into circulation, since it is sold as a capacity, a power, and a specific amount of labour-time was required to produce this capacity, this power” (Marx 1976, 1066).

Engels not only acknowledged the existence of domestic work and the gender division of labour within it but even observed that the reversal of gender roles during the industrial revolution, and the distress caused by it, was possible only “because the sexes have been placed in a false position from the beginning” (Engels 1975, 439). He did not carry that analysis further, however, and this theoretical gap was what was sought to be remedied in the debate around domestic labour (i.e., housework and childcare) that raged in the 1970s (Malos 1982). Let us look at the contributions that throw light on the production of labour power.

Most participants agreed that domestic labour is socially useful and necessary; that is, it is useful not just to other members of the household but to society as a whole. It was agreed that domestic labour transfers the value of the commodities bought with the wage to the end product, labour power. But does it also *create* value?

Those who said “yes” (Dalla Costa and James 1972; Seccombe 1973 and 1975) were surely correct, while those who said “no” (Benston 1969; Coulson et al. 1975; Gardiner et al. 1975; Himmelweit and Mohun 1977) were wrong. Domestic labour is part of the production process of labour power, a commodity that is sold on the (labour) market. To say that it does not produce value would contradict the whole starting point of Marx’s theory of surplus value, according to which

the value of each commodity is determined by . . . the labour-time socially necessary to produce it. . . . Hence in determining the value of the yarn, or the labour-time required for its production, all the special processes carried on at various times and in different places which were necessary, first to produce the cotton and the wasted portion of the spindle, and then with the cotton and spindle to spin the yarn, may together be looked on as different and successive phases of the same labour process. (Marx 1976, 293–294)

The denial that domestic labour produces value seems to come from a confused amalgam of two ideas. The first is that labour producing use values that are not themselves sold as commodities but are directly incorporated into another product that is sold as a commodity does not produce value.

If this were true, it would result in an absurd situation where the value of the labour power of a male worker who eats his meals at restaurants, gets his clothes

and linen washed at a laundry, and pays for a cleaner to clean his flat is much higher than that of another worker, doing the same job at the same workplace and earning the same wage, whose wife does the shopping, cooking, washing up, washing, and cleaning. The second idea is that labour that is not waged does not produce value. This would result in the even greater absurdity that the products of millions of petty commodity producers around the world—farmers and artisans—have the same value as their inputs, since their labour, being unwaged, adds no value to them! It is surely more logical to argue that to the extent that domestic labour performs a function that is necessary for the production of labour power, it produces value, since “the value of labour-power is determined, as in the case of every other commodity, by the labour-time necessary for the production, and consequently also the reproduction, of this specific article” (Marx 1976, 274). This is reproductive labour, because it makes an essential contribution to social reproduction, and “once the interdependence of work and family responsibilities is acknowledged, it becomes harder to attribute value only to paid work” (Conaghan 2002, 55).

Does domestic labour produce surplus value? A housewife is not paid wages, but her subsistence is paid for out of her partner’s wage, so his employer pays her indirectly. If the amount paid for her subsistence is the same as or more than what her partner would have to pay to buy the services she performs on the market, then she would not be contributing to surplus value. But if her subsistence costs are less than the value of the services she performs, either her partner is exploiting her by withholding part of the payment for her labour, or her partner’s employer is keeping part of what he would otherwise have had to pay out as wages, and thus her labour is contributing indirectly to his surplus value.

Thus although Dalla Costa and James (1973) were wrong to think that domestic labour is always productive (directly providing profit or surplus value), it is true that this labour may allow extra surplus value to be appropriated by subsidizing the production of labour power. The Bolivian women’s leader and miner’s wife Domitila Barrios de Chungara made a precise calculation of this, comparing the work performed in the home with the cost of the same services bought on the market: “One day I got the idea of making a chart. We put as an example the price of washing clothes per dozen pieces and we figured out how many dozens of items we washed per month. Then the cook’s wage, the baby-sitter’s, the servant’s . . . Adding it all up, the wage needed to pay us for what we do in the home . . . was much higher than what the men earned in the mine for a month” (Barrios de Chungara and Viezzer 1978, 35). Thus if a miner’s wife died or stopped working and the man was compelled to buy on the market the services she had performed, his wage would not be sufficient, showing that it was less than the value of labour power. The women’s surplus labour allowed the mine

owner to appropriate more surplus value than he would otherwise have been able to. But it is impossible to see this effect so long as the production of labour power (and its value) is seen solely as the activity of waged workers. Only if it is seen as the collective product of the working class household is it possible to calculate the real rate of surplus value.

What happens if there are two or more wage earners in the family? We can examine this by looking at three different situations found in Nigeria. Situation A is one in which a male worker in a formal-sector enterprise is able to support his wife and, say, two school-going children. They might rent a two-bedroom flat with running water, use a gas stove, and eat fairly well. The woman is there when the children come home from school and can spend time with them even while she does other chores. In effect, the man's wage may be sufficient to pay for the basic subsistence of another person (his wife) to do all this work, but she may not actually receive sufficient money from her husband (cf. Seccombe 1973).

If it is a woman who is the formal-sector employee, the continuity between her waged and unwaged work is clearer: she must do both, perhaps with some help from others at home, in order to support and sustain the family. The increase in time spent on domestic labour in order to compensate for lower wages is also more obvious. A study in Delhi showed that in response to a cut in real wages between 1994/1995 and 1999/2000 resulting from inflation, the total time expended on waged work and domestic labour by women workers increased from thirteen or fourteen hours to sixteen or seventeen hours a day, as they spent more time shopping around for the cheapest goods, queuing up at the ration shop, and cleaning inferior (cheaper) rice (Chhachhi 2005, 247–249).

If the male breadwinner loses his job and has to take up informal employment in a small enterprise, earning half of what he was earning before (situation B), his family has two options. They could move to cheaper informal accommodation where his wife has to spend many more hours collecting water from the shared tap, cooking on a kerosene stove, queuing up at the local shop, cleaning, preparing food, washing up, and so on. Their standard of living would be lower, but by spending much more time on housework—perhaps sixteen as opposed to ten hours per day—she could feed everyone on the lower wage and keep the children in school. Alternatively, she might find a job that pays half or less of her husband's former wage. They can then stay in their flat, but everyone has to help with the housework, even though she continues to do the bulk of it, working perhaps eighteen or more hours a day. In both cases, the rate of surplus value has gone up. If the technology in the small enterprise where the man now works is the same as in the large one, half of his former wage is being taken as additional surplus value. If his wife does not get a job, this is partly compensated for by her

increased domestic work; if she does, then her wage may compensate for the loss in his earnings, but now she works even longer hours as well as creating surplus value for her own employer. It now takes two wage earners to support the family.

Situation C is the most tragic: the man loses his job and cannot find another—at most he can find casual work for ten to fifteen days a month. His wife gets a job, but even their combined earnings cannot support the family, so the children are taken out of school and sent to work too. It now takes four wages to support the family. They are all producing surplus value, and their collective working hours have increased substantially.

This situation occurred, for example, as a consequence of the closure of textile mills in Ahmedabad (Breman 2004, 203–209) or Kaduna in Nigeria in the early 2000s. Millions of agricultural and migrant-labour families have always been in situation C, as indeed were most working-class families in Marx's time:

“everywhere, except in the metallurgical industries, young persons (under 18), women and children form by far the most preponderant element in the factory personnel” (Marx 1976, 577); even a steel and iron works “employs 500 boys under 18, and of these about a third, or 170, are under the age of 13” (Marx 1976, 371). If we include other permutations—for example, where there are small children in the family and a slightly older girl is kept at home to look after them while her parents go out to work—the bulk of the labour force in Nigeria belongs to situations B and C.

The Genesis of the Working-Class Family

Left to itself, capital's “werewolf-like hunger for surplus value” (Marx 1976, 353) pushes down wages and extends the working day to such an extent that all members of the family, excluding only the smallest children, work long hours in wage labour simply in order to survive. If at any time it needs to retrench workers, it dismisses men rather than women and children. The family as a space apart from capital is destroyed. It is workers, through their struggles for higher wages, the abolition of child labour, and the restriction of working hours, who win back time and space for the family. In this they are supported up to a point by the state, acting in the interests of the capitalist class as a whole. At an earlier stage, the state used legislation to force reluctant workers to labour long hours, but after capital extended these hours to such an extent that it “produces the premature exhaustion and death of this labour-power itself” (Marx 1976, 376), the state stepped in again to limit working hours and ensure that labour power was not “maintained and developed only in a *crippled state*.” In such a situation, the price of labour power (embodied in wages) is below its value, since “the

value of every commodity is determined by the labour-time required to provide it in its *normal quality*” (Marx 1976, 277, emphasis added).

Thus both wages and working hours enter into the calculation of whether the price of labour power is or is not below its value, since labour power is sold for a specified number of hours; this calculation cannot be accurate unless all the hours worked by all members of the family in order to produce labour power are taken into account. But labour power is not a purely physiological entity. “In contrast . . . with the case of other commodities, the determination of the value of labour-power contains a historical and moral element” (Marx 1976, 275): wages must enable the working class to live at an acceptable standard of living. Setting the value of labour power at an acceptable level and then ensuring that its price does not fall below this value are important goals of working-class struggle. The “moral and historical” element would differ from one society to another, but it seems reasonable to set the minimum at a level where income covers basic requirements of food, water, clothing, shelter, health care, and education; where the minimum age for employment complies with the ILO norm of fifteen years; and where adults get at least eleven to twelve hours per working day for rest and recreation, plus paid weekly days off and annual holidays.

Demands of Women Workers

The domestic workload of informal women workers would be lightened considerably by the provision of decent housing, potable water, sanitation, and primary health care to all households, which would also reduce illness and death from preventable diseases such as dysentery and malaria. These have all been demanded by informal women workers, along with the formalization of their labour. In Nigeria, this constitutes a massive agenda, but unless it is undertaken, labour power will continue to be produced in a crippled form. However, would these changes alone ensure that women are not treated as cheap and flexible labour? The experience of women in the pharmaceutical factories, as well as the experience in other countries, suggests that they would not. The residual problem of the gender division of labour in the workplace and the home, which restricts the earning capacity of women, would still remain.

The demands of the pharmaceutical women workers took over from where those of the informal workers left off. There had been struggles over working hours, which in all the factories had been reduced below the statutory maximum, so that in most cases, women got Saturdays and Sundays off (URG 1986). In the two factories where women were working longer hours, they complained that they did not get enough time at home. Reducing the statutory maximum, at least down to forty hours per week, is an issue that the male-dominated national unions have

not taken up, yet these women felt it was absolutely vital for any worker who has to combine waged work with domestic labour. On the issue of job segregation at work, women had different opinions, but most agreed that if a woman felt she could do what was regarded as a “man’s job,” she should be allowed to try her hand at it. There were no cases where women had tried to get “women’s jobs” upgraded on the grounds that they involved more skill than they were credited for; however, there was great anger in one factory where women felt they were doing the same work as men but being allotted a lower grade and pay scale. Most of them felt that they should be protected from having to do night work. If it had been argued that the goal should be to abolish night work for men, too, as in Sweden (Lewenhak 1977, 287), the equality argument could not have been used so easily to remove this protection from women.

On the issue of the gender division of labour in the home, there was a wide diversity of opinions. It was commonly felt that if women were earning, men should help at home. Some women felt that men were not of much use at home, but others said that their husbands took leave and did all the housework after the birth of a child. Most felt that a man should get ten days to two weeks of paternity leave (most were not getting any at all) and have access to crèche facilities for his children if his wife were dead, ill, or worked at a place where there was no crèche (cf. Briskin and McDermott 1993, 10). Male unionists, most of whom had encountered such situations, supported these demands. However, companies flatly refused to consider these arguments, even under extremely tragic circumstances (see Hensman 1996b, 194–200).

Socializing and Sharing Domestic Labour

Moving toward a resolution of these issues requires us to take a closer look at the work performed in the home. It can be divided into work that results in a product that is distinct from a person (such as cooking a meal or washing clothes) and work whose product is inseparable from a person (like childcare). The first kind of production can be mechanized or taken over by capitalism, and in practice this has occurred to some degree. Women workers may buy bread instead of making chapatis (type of home made flat bread in India) or swallow in Nigeria, use a range of processed and semi-processed foods, and use a washing machine. There is considerable scope for mass production of these goods and services to proceed further, especially in Nigeria, reducing the workload of this type of domestic labour: laundries, take-out restaurants, and community kitchens are all possibilities, and women’s cooperatives providing these services have been formed.

Cleaning is a special case. There is not much scope for mass-production techniques here; it is labour-intensive work made more onerous by the fact that

its product is noticed only when the work is not done. Most upper- and middle-class households in Nigeria get this work done by domestic workers, but that is hardly an ideal solution: it is not accessible to working-class families, makes use of cheap labour, and tends to reinforce a social perception that cleaning work, which is socially necessary for hygiene and health, marks out a person as inferior. In most societies it pays poorly (if it pays at all), and in India it has traditionally been consigned to Dalits (the lowest caste), who were at one time—and still are in some places—treated as untouchable (Menon 2005c). In cases where people are unable to do their own cleaning, one solution, explored by the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), would be to have cleaning cooperatives supplying the service.⁷

Finally, there is caring work, where there can be no mechanization, no substitution of dead for living labour: caring and nurturing is by its nature labour intensive. Although the majority of people needing care are children (since everyone begins life as a child), there are also adults who need it. Many people with disabilities and old people need part-time or full-time attendance, and an accident or stroke can at one blow convert an able-bodied adult into one needing long-term care. In Nigeria, this work falls mainly on women, and with the increasing longevity of the population, the care of old people is becoming more important.

One solution to the problem of childcare proposed by Lilina Zinoviev shortly after the Russian revolution was state-run childrearing: “ ‘Our task now is to oblige the mother to give her children to us—to the Soviet State.’ The idea was taken up in Kollontai’s formulation: ‘Children are the State’s concern.’ She added: ‘The social obligation of motherhood consists primarily in producing a healthy and fit-for-life child. . . . Her second obligation is to feed the baby at her own breast’ ” (Broyelle 1977, 71). A similar suggestion was that “it would . . . be desirable for the child to be left to his parents infinitely less than at present, and for his studies and his diversions to be carried on . . . under the direction of adults whose bonds with him would be impersonal and pure” (de Beauvoir 1997, 539). A logical conclusion following from this approach is that women’s liberation requires the application of modern technology to the production of children, in order to free women from the “social obligation” to produce and breastfeed them (Firestone 1970).

However, the practical results of institutionalized childcare were not particularly positive. Small children left in full-time nurseries in Russia were found to be more backward than those looked after at home (Rowbotham 1974, 168), and as a woman lamented in a samizdat publication smuggled out of Russia in 1979: “Kindergartens and crèches are a utopia, which in real life turn out to be anti-

utopias. If we send healthy children to such establishments, we get back sick children. Women must constantly report sick in order to be at home with the child. Not with the healthy child, as the case was earlier, but with the sick child” (Malachevskaya 1979; cf. McAuley 1981, 198–99). Another problem, where day-and-night nurseries were tried out in Russia and China, was that women themselves wanted more contact with their children (Rowbotham 1974, 196; Dunayevskaya 1996, 73–74).

The more usual feminist demands are for women to be able to control their sexuality and fertility (Weinbaum 1978, 29–30) and for the development of technologies that would enable them to do so safely, thus ensuring that women have babies only if and when they want them.⁸ Advocating the elimination of pregnancy and breastfeeding suggests that the cause of the oppression of women is their biological difference from men. Biological differences such as sex and skin color can certainly be made the pretext for oppression, but it is the social relations under which this occurs that are to blame, not the differences themselves. The biological difference in this case—the fact that women’s bodies are adapted to pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding while men’s bodies are not—need not lead to the oppression of women. Whether it does or not depends on technological developments and social relations, which in turn determine whether or not women can control their sexuality and fertility safely, whether or not childbearing is a physically safe and socially respected activity, and whether or not there are facilities (like adequate maternity leave and workplace crèches) that provide social support for women who wish to combine childbearing and breastfeeding with paid work.

As for other elements of the gender division of labour, there is no evidence that they have any biological basis, in the sense that all the tasks can be performed either by men or by women, and competence depends not on gender but on inclination and acquired skills. However, given particular social relations, it may well make economic sense to relegate certain tasks to women other than those for which they are biologically adapted. In precapitalist agricultural societies, where having a large number of children was an asset, child mortality was high, and women breastfed each child for one year or more, women might spend over twenty years of their lives in these activities. Under those circumstances, it was more efficient for them to do other household tasks as well, but these relations have been revolutionized by capitalism (Ferguson and Folbre 1981, 321–323).

In Nigeria, having a large number of children is no longer an asset and may be a liability, with children constituting more mouths to feed and child labour driving down wage rates and causing unemployment by competing with adult labour. Government family-planning programs make birth control relatively accessible

and have succeeded in reducing the birth rate; child mortality, while still high, is rapidly being reduced; and a combination of these two developments means that mothers need not spend more than two or three years of their lives breastfeeding infants. On the other side, the interest of capitalism in women as wage labourers provides them with an alternative that is often necessary for the survival of the family. In other words, the material basis for the gender division of labour has changed drastically.

The fact that childcare involves a relationship between carer and child means that if it is passed on to others completely, the relationship is affected, but it does not follow that it cannot be socialized at all. Indeed, at a slightly higher age—five or six years—children routinely go to school, where people outside the family look after them for several hours a day.

However, good-quality socialized care requires a high ratio of caregivers to people being cared for, which makes it expensive.⁹ This is probably why under capitalism it is not provided without a struggle by both feminists and the labour movement (Zaretsky 1982, 215–217), except as a costly service to the privileged few who can afford it, or in circumstances where a shortage of labour power makes it necessary to induct large numbers of women into the labour force. In Nigeria, where millions of children do not even get schooling, much less preschool care, providing high-quality socialized care and education for all children, including residential care for street children, would require a substantial investment. Socialized care of adults is hardly available at all except for the rich; the appalling cruelty with which mentally ill patients are treated in many institutions, as well as the routine appearance of people with disabilities and old people begging on the streets, testify to the disastrous underfunding of this sector.

However, although there is not much formal socialization, a great deal of informal sharing of care does take place. The boundary between the family and the outside world is not as sharp in South Asian cultures as it has become in Western ones. The term “family” would usually refer to the extended family, even where, as in Bombay, there are many nuclear family households due to migration, and it is quite normal for people who are not kin to be addressed as brother, sister, aunt, uncle, mother, father, son, daughter, and so forth. In traditional families, these honorary relatives would tend to be from the same caste and religion, but in other settings they might simply be neighbours or close friends who could, for example, be asked to look after children on an ad hoc basis. This system has advantages and disadvantages. In traditional families, it means that young women—and men, for that matter—are more tightly controlled; young women have a heavier workload because they are catering to a

larger number of people; and even if there are grandparents around to help with childcare, this comes at a price, in the sense that the children may then be imbued with traditional values such as rigid gender roles. On the other hand, the fluidity of boundaries means that the isolation of mothers with young children is less common, and the small minority of alternative families that are not based on biological relationships and heterosexual marriage are more easily accepted in a metropolis such as Bombay, where traditional communities have partially broken down.

Socialization of some caring work helps to reduce the huge burden now carried mainly by women within the family, but it does not by itself eliminate the gender division of labour. It is quite possible that carers in the socialized facilities are women, that the nurturing that continues to be done in the home is done by women, and that women continue to be treated as cheap labour. Changing this would require challenging the gender division of labour practically and ideologically, because it stunts both those involved in round-the-clock caring work, who never get a chance to exercise other skills and abilities, and those who do not engage in it at all and who never develop the skills and intelligence required for this work.

Practical measures to counter it would include eliminating the gender division of labour in employment, working for the equal sharing of domestic labour between men and women, the provision of crèches and nurseries for small children whose parents need childcare, sheltered accommodation or home care for adults who need it, shorter working hours, and regular part-time jobs—if possible with flexible working hours to suit the needs of the employees—for both men and women who have caring responsibilities (cf. Molyneux 1979, 27). But the ideological struggle has priority, because without winning that, the practical struggle will not be won. The fact that, despite decades of feminism and close to two centuries of the labour movement, caring and nurturing continue to be undervalued and seen as “women’s work” needs to be explained.

One strand of the explanation can be identified in what has been described as “a great intellectual and cultural ambivalence within feminism,” in that it “represented both the highest development of liberal individualism and also a critique of liberal individualism” (Gordon 1982, 45). The bourgeois ideology of individualism penetrated not just liberal feminism but also radical and socialist feminism, leading to a devaluation of caring and nurturing because they constitute, inevitably, a handicap in the competitive struggle for recognition. The other strand of the explanation is constituted by the fact that there have been attempts within working class movements to eliminate competition between women and men by reinforcing the domination of men over women. Although Marx cannot be accused of advocating such domination, he did help to create the

basis for it by ignoring, and thereby devaluing, the socially necessary caring work traditionally done by women.

Excusing oppressive and sometimes violent domestic relationships by attributing them to the all-pervasive ideological influence of capital or patriarchy, as some Marxists and feminists do (see Chodorow and Contratto 1982, 68–69), is a reactionary position. If it is possible to live in a capitalist society and struggle against capitalism, it is equally possible to struggle against authoritarian relationships between men, women, and children; indeed, without this struggle, workers can never escape from subordination to capital. Challenging the domination of capital requires the full involvement of working-class women and children in the class struggle. As Domitila puts it, “the first battle to be won is to let the woman, the man, the children participate in the struggle of the working class, so that the home can become a stronghold that the enemy can’t overcome. Because if you have the enemy inside your own house, then it’s just one more weapon that our common enemy can use toward a dangerous end” (Barrios de Chungara and Viezzer 1978, 36).

Women have an advantage in this struggle to the extent that they recognize “both human needs for nurturance, sharing and growth, and the potential for meeting those needs in a non-hierarchical, nonpatriarchal society” (Hartmann 1981, 33), but it can only be won by the working class as a whole.

Solidarity Instead of Competition or Domination and Subordination

What are the elements of such a struggle, and how far can it progress under capitalism? The first requirement is a battle against authoritarianism in the family; the second is an understanding and acceptance within the labour movement of the value of caring work and the skills and intelligence required for it, followed by the recognition that these need to be fostered in all human beings (Ruddick 1982). Caring conforms to the Marxist ideal of work that is not for profit but directly for the satisfaction of human need; hence recognizing its importance is crucial to the struggle against capitalist exploitation and oppression. Like the Gestalt image of a vase that, when looked at in a different way, reveals two profiles facing each other, whenever we look at a product, we should imagine the faces of its makers and the faces of those who cared for the makers.

While the demand for “wages for housework” has the drawback that if met it would eliminate even the limited autonomy enjoyed by working class women and bring their domestic labour directly under the control of the state as employer (Freeman 1982), the demand that the value produced by domestic labour be

recognized—for example in statistics such as GDP, in settlements on divorce, and in allocating pensions to women—is an important one, helping to make this vast amount of labour visible. Counting the time spent in domestic labour as part of the working day is also important.

The backwardness of the situation in Nigeria, where traditional hierarchies based on gender and age still predominate, could be an advantage if it allows the women's liberation movement to avoid the dead end of liberal individualism. While often confused with the development of individuality, it is in fact as destructive of individuality—the full development of the unique identity of every human being—as authoritarianism and patriarchy, which crush individuality in a more obvious way. Individuality can develop in a child only if he or she is surrounded by the loving attention of other human beings; children completely deprived of this fail to develop their potentialities, and the development of children who receive inadequate interaction of this type is severely compromised. Yet providing this unstinting love and attention inevitably puts the giver at a disadvantage in a competitive market and would therefore be ruled out in a purely market driven economy.

This contradiction at the heart of bourgeois ideology—the fact that taken to its logical conclusion it threatens bourgeois society with extinction, and therefore the reproduction of competitive individualism depends on its opposite, that is, the reproduction of self-sacrificing women—is what leads to the right-wing insistence on the family as a separate realm from which the logic of capital is excluded (Thorne 1982, 19). However, from the standpoint of the principle of solidarity, according to which the rights and welfare of each individual are linked to those of others, there is no such contradiction; an ethic of care, in which the well-being of the person who is being cared for is seen as essential to the happiness of the carer, is entirely compatible with it. Working for an ideal of nurturance and equal respect for human beings both inside and outside the family (whatever shape or form it may take) is thus an essential component of a labour movement built on the principle of solidarity.

The practical outcome of this understanding would include a struggle for the allocation of vastly more social labour time to this work than occurs currently. For most trade unions in Nigeria, which have engaged in collective bargaining exclusively for their own members and have never had a solidaristic policy, the idea of a social wage (including education and health care for all) as a trade union demand would be a new and important departure. Shortening working hours and increasing the number of well-paid part-time jobs with pro rata benefits would improve productivity and expand employment in addition to allowing more time for domestic labour. The Maternity Benefit Act and Factories

Act, which require individual employers to pay maternity benefits and provide crèches for the children of their women workers, are direct disincentives to their employing women, as well as being somewhat unfair, since the generational reproduction of labour power is a service to the capitalist class as a whole rather than the individual capitalist. Funding parental leave and childcare from contributions made by all employers, workers, and the government removes this anomaly. The final goal of adequate resources for the production of labour power cannot be reached under capitalism, yet it is possible to make considerable progress in that direction even within capitalist society.

Global Initiatives

Ensuring significant progress in combating sexual harassment, socializing the production of labour power, and eliminating the gender division of labour also requires a global movement that would pressure governments to do this. A striking feature of women's lives that emerges from this analysis is the continuity between the oppression that they face inside and outside the workplace. Thus domestic labour puts them at a disadvantage in employment. If they become active in a union they may face disapproval at home. And they may get sexually abused, even murdered, on the way to or from work: indeed, such incidents became so common among female maquila workers (working in the free trade zone) in Ciudad Juárez in Mexico that a woman activist dubbed it feminicidio or "femicide" and set up a coalition to fight against it (Wright 2001). Therefore, unions fighting for women's human rights in the workplace need to make common cause with feminist groups fighting for women's human rights in society as a whole.

The UN CEDAW Committee, in its General Recommendation no. 19 at its eleventh session in 1992, included a definition of sexual harassment and recommended measures that member states could take to protect women from it (UN 1997–2007). In 2005, the ILO issued a report that begins:

Sexual harassment is a hazard encountered in workplaces across the world that reduces the quality of working life, jeopardizes the well-being of women and men, undermines gender equality and imposes costs on firms and organizations. For the International Labour Organization, workplace sexual harassment is a barrier toward its primary goal of promoting decent working conditions for all workers.

It goes on to observe that "although it has male victims, sexual harassment is overwhelmingly directed at women, especially those in less-powerful places in the labour market," and that legal measures to prohibit it have been taken mainly since 1995. It concludes by pointing out that "workplace policies and programmes on sexual harassment both reinforce legal prohibitions and play a powerful preventive role" (McCann 2005). However, neither CEDAW nor any of

the ILO conventions specifically mention sexual harassment at work; perhaps it might help if there were a separate ILO Convention on Sexual Harassment.

On the other hand, there are numerous instruments dealing with gender discrimination. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is the main instrument that can be used to oppose gender discrimination, and a number of ILO conventions, including the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (no. 100), and Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (no. 111), can help eliminate the gender division of labour. The Forty-Hour Week Convention, 1935 (no. 47), and Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (no. 156), could help workers trying to combine waged work with caring, and the Part-Time Work Convention, 1994 (no. 175), and Home Work Convention, 1996 (no. 177), could protect the rights of workers who enter into these types of contracts because they are also doing unwaged caring work. The Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (no. 183), explicitly seeks to protect the rights of women who wish to combine motherhood with paid work. The United Nation's International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which stipulates among other things that state parties must provide access to education, health care, and social security for all without discrimination, is another instrument that could be used to combat discrimination against women.

These are issues on which trade unions can work with women's rights groups, to ensure that all countries incorporate these provisions in their legislation and make provisions for their implementation. This would include insisting that all employers have a policy ruling out sexual harassment and discrimination of any sort and working to ensure equal opportunities, which would help other disadvantaged groups as well as women. It would also include educational programs to promote opposition to sexual harassment and abuse both inside and outside the workplace, recognition of nurturing and caring as socially necessary and desirable activities for both men and women, opposition to the gender division of labour both inside and outside the home, and opposition to discrimination against women within unions. In the words of South African women union activists, "gender roles can oppress both men and women. . . . To fight for gender equality is to fight for the right of any person to work, live and love in a way that is not determined by being born male or female" (Kgoali et al. 1992, 48). As in the case of union democracy, this is an issue that unions have to tackle if they are to gain the power they need to confront the challenges of globalization and the economic crisis.

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Notes

1. Engels supports his description by quoting from an account by an unemployed male worker. But when I interviewed women workers from SEWA, some of whom were sole breadwinners, there were depressing accounts of unemployed husbands who not only did no housework but sometimes also beat their wives and children.
2. The information in this section was obtained in group interviews with women workers by Sujata Gothoskar and me between 1981 and 1986 as part of our work for the URG and in interviews with Kamala Karkal of the Pfizer Employees' Union and Philo Martin of the Glaxo Wellcome Union in 1994.
3. Information in this section was obtained in group interviews with women workers by Chanda Korgaokar and me between 1998 and 2003 as part of our work for *Workplaces That Work For Women* (<https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-in-the-workforce-india/>).
4. Bastis are shantytowns. Chawls originally meant the housing built for workers by mill owners—three- or four-story buildings with one-room apartments going off a common corridor, with shared bathrooms and toilets—but today they can also mean apartments with more than one room and an internal bathroom and toilet or, conversely, something closely resembling a basti. The lack of an internal water supply in bastis means that often the washing of clothes and dishes is done on the doorstep, with wastewater going straight into the drains outside, so it is not an isolated occupation.
5. In case this is doubted by anyone, one way of demonstrating the point would be to ask: is it possible for someone else to substitute for a person in this particular activity or not? If someone else eats all my meals for me, I would die of starvation. But if someone else cooks all my meals for me, I would not suffer at all and may even enjoy them more than if I cooked them myself. Thus, in general, if it is possible to substitute one person for another in some activity, it is a process of production, while if that is not possible, it is a process of individual consumption.
6. The one-child policy, combined with preference for boys, led to the same problem being faced in an even more acute form in China (BBC 2007).
7. However, it is important that the cooperatives should provide adequate wages, benefits, and facilities for their members. On one occasion when I arrived at SEWA very early in the morning and was invited to sit inside while the place was being cleaned, I was taken aback when the woman who was doing the cleaning, herself a member of the SEWA cleaning cooperative, started complaining bitterly about how low her wages were. After that, I was not surprised to hear from a local trade unionist that SEWA members had joined other unions to fight for higher wages! The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a national Indian trade union registered in 1972 with a membership base of over 1.5 million (2018) poor, self-employed women workers from the informal economy across 16 states in India.
8. A woman's right to control her own fertility also partially protects a child's right to be wanted, loved, and adequately cared for by at least one parent. This is absolutely essential, given the huge amount of time and effort that is involved in this work. Advocates of the socialization of childcare often forget that this presupposes a much larger number of people who love children and wish to spend time on childcare than do so at present.
9. This applies to schoolchildren too. Teachers are responsible for pastoral care as well as education, and therefore even a ratio of twenty-five to thirty children to one teacher—never mind the usual Indian ratio of fifty to seventy children to one teacher!—is not low enough.
10. The pamphlet is an edited version of Chapter 5 from Hensman, Rohini. *Workers, Unions, and Global Capitalism : Lessons from India*, Columbia University Press, 2011 - <http://cup.columbia.edu/book/workers-unions-and-global-capitalism/9780231148009> The full book is available for free download from: <https://ivavalleybooks.com/2021/07/01/workers-unions-and-global-capitalism-lessons-from-india-rohini-hensman>