

Strategy Planning Workshop of the Feminist Network on Gender, Development and Information Society Policies

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Globalisation, Women and Work

Globalisation

The term globalisation is widely used to describe a variety of economic, cultural, social and political changes that have shaped the world over the past fifty odd years from the much celebrated revolution in information technology to the diminishing of national and geo-political boundaries in an ever-expanding, transnational movement of goods, services and capital.

It is commonly accepted that advancements in applied sciences, information and other modern technologies, and communications have played central roles in making globalisation possible. For example:

- US and European banks deal with their customers through call centres in Asia;
- Popular brands of clothing and sportswear design their products in the US or Europe, manufacture them in developing countries and sell them all over the world at comparable prices;
- The internet allows commodities, futures and currencies to be traded across the world, taking advantage of time differences in different bourses and exchange markets;
- Legal and medical establishments in the affluent North outsource much of their processing to select developing countries such as India to take advantage of a skilled and educated labour force that costs a fraction of what these establishments would pay in their home countries;

Globalisation is both a result and a force of modernisation and capitalist expansion, and entails the integration of economic activity at multiple levels (local, national and regional) into a 'global' marketplace, i.e., a marketplace that transcends geo-political borders and is not subject to regulation by nation states. The main practical manifestations of this integration are:

- The dismantling of national barriers to external trade and finance;
- Deregulation of the economy;
- Export driven economic growth;
- Removal of controls on the transnational mobility of finance capital and expansion of portfolio capital;
- Privatisation;
- The restructuring of local and national economies to facilitate free market capitalism.

Globalisation does not happen on its own, nor is there anything inherently natural about it. It is made possible by putting place specific policies and governance systems at national, regional and international levels, which facilitate free market capitalism and capital accumulation in private rather than collective hands. These policy and governance regimes are generally referred to as 'neoliberalism.'

Globalisation is also driven and facilitated by many types of actors. These include:

- Private national and trans-national corporations, that seek profits and have the ability to use modern technology and information services effectively to globalise operations, cut production and operational costs and expand their profit bases;

- Governments (state/province and national) who secure domestic and external markets for corporations through tax holidays, subsidies, preferential bidding and contract awards, export credits, development aid, trade and investment agreements, and even military actions; governments also set domestic policies that facilitate privatisation, deregulation and liberalisation;
- International Financial Institutions (IFIs), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and United Nations (UN) technical agencies, who provide the economic, financial and political architecture for globalisation, including governance;
- International groupings such as the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Economic Forum (WEF), which serve as fora to determine the rules of capitalist global governance.

The reconfiguration of state controls on trade and investment, and the new technologies that are shaping today's knowledge economy have accelerated the speed and scope of capital mobility over the past few decades. Today, big businesses can treat the entire world as an expanded field of operations, moving sites of production and exchange at will, and merging with the private sectors of distantly located economies to create a global private sector.

Societies all over the world are experiencing the commercialisation of more and more aspects of life, accompanied by the ugly contradictions of growing inequality within and between countries. Contemporary culture and society are increasingly shaped by neoliberal economic measures that supposedly enhance "economic freedom" and "consumer choice."

Globalisation proponents claim that by providing near universal access to knowledge and technology, globalisation will eventually result in convergences of income, consuming power, living standards and political ideals. A global economy unfettered by protectionism will lead to increases in economic growth and wealth, and more people in the world will be able to enjoy the advantages of modernisation, technological progress and civilization.

Globalisation has certainly increased the wealth of many in both the North and South, and has indeed created new opportunities for education, participation in the work-force and capital/wealth accumulation. At the same time, it has also led to growing inequalities across and within countries, shattering economic crises, collapse in standards of living, widespread societal and ethnic conflict, social disintegration and increased insecurity for a disproportionately large part of the world's population. Rapid and unregulated economic growth in many countries has come at the cost of jobs, local livelihoods, environmental quality, social and political security, and natural resource reserves.

Women and Work

Globalisation has resulted in a particular set of dynamics in which women are playing a critical role, not always as actors of choice, but often as shock absorbers in events that they have little control over. The policies that facilitate economic globalisation in particular were never gender neutral to begin with and have impacted the specific situations of women, as well as gender relations at family, community and societal levels in particular ways.

Women and men experience economic and political trends differently in both nature and impact because of their differing roles in production, reproduction of the family and society, maintaining

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culture and the social fabric, and in their abilities to shape national policies and politics.

At the same time, women are not an undifferentiated mass. Class, ethnicity, race, religion and culture are important factors in the manner and extent to which women are able to take advantages of the opportunities that globalisation offers.

For women with access to higher education, professional skills and capital, globalisation has opened up new economic opportunities. But for women who do not have this access and are concentrated in the low-skilled and unskilled work, economic globalisation has often resulted in:

- job losses (since women's labour and productive capacity are easily replaced by cheaper labour elsewhere and new manufacturing technology);
- precarious and insecure employment in low wage jobs with poor work conditions;
- displacement from traditional occupations (which may or may not be positive);
- increased involuntary and often distress migration;
- greater economic, social and physical insecurity (because of dwindling governmental supports for the poor and vulnerable, increased family and social tensions and conflicts, and the necessity of working in environments that are often hostile);
- erosion of labour and human rights because of new work conditions.

More and more women are migrating on their own, both domestically and internationally as the primary wage earners in their households and as temporary workers in low-paid jobs. A particularly ugly side of women's so called 'mobility' is the increase of trafficking of women and female children in much of the South, the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Two important aspects of how globalisation has affected women's participation in the work-force are the globalisation of the manufacturing production and service sectors through the off-shoring of blue and white collar jobs respectively. In both cases, new international divisions of labour have been created. While the off-shoring of manufacturing and service sector jobs from the North to the South have indeed created new employment opportunities for women, they have not necessarily resulted in job, wage and income equalities between women and men, nor have they provided stable and sustained sources of income for majority of the women.

No country in Asia was able to expand its manufacturing capacity without pulling an increasing proportion of women into industrial waged employment. In the early 1990s, women accounted for more than 43 percent of the manufacturing work force in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. The manufacturing sector in itself accounted for more than 20 percent of GDP in these countries. In the Thai export sector, women accounted for 90 per cent of the workforce in the canned seafood industry and 85 percent in the garment and accessory industry. Because of the relatively low level of skills required in such employment, women workers were and still are often laid off, or asked to work for lesser wages and reduced benefits.

In smaller economies such as Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam, women's labour is considered a significant element of the 'comparative advantage' of these countries in export oriented manufacturing. While export industries certainly offer women opportunities for employment and income, the unregulated and competitive nature of these industries also means that women's labour is usually unprotected and dispensable. Few governments have been, or are willing to enforce legislation that ensures women workers in this sector with fair living wages, benefits, occupational safety and opportunities for upgrading skills. In times of crisis, governments argue

that economic growth must come before labour rights, human dignity and the development of future human potential.

There is also a growing “informalisation” of jobs in the export manufacturing sector through subcontracting of production to unorganised women workers, often on exploitative working terms. While there has always been a large informal sector in Asia in which women have been employed (for example, selling fruit, flowers, vegetables and locally processed food, domestic work, caring for the elderly and children, etc), the drive by corporations to lower production costs has led to the emergence of particular types of informal sector work such as piece work for the garment industry.

Since the mid-1990s, globalisation of production has expanded beyond manufacturing to include services, commonly referred to as the off-shoring of white collar jobs. This trend is linked to an increase in women’s share in service sector employment in the South, and mirrors the ‘feminisation’ of export-oriented manufacturing jobs in the 1980s and the 1990s. Emerging data from UNCTAD and independent researchers show that most of the newly created white collar jobs also came in lower wage categories in the service sectors (for example in data processing and call centers) and that these jobs are precarious. A global service provider can up and move its back office and subsidiary operations at anytime to take advantage of investment benefits offered by another country.. There are also concerns regarding work conditions in these growing sectors, for example, long work hours including nights and weekends, non-ergonomic working conditions, lack of physical security, etc.

This is not to say that women do not get higher rung jobs in white collar off-shoring, but rather that the expansion of the global trade in services favours those with higher education and access to higher technology in terms of wages as well as types of jobs. And there is a kind of informalisation of white collar off-shoring as well, but this requires an initial investment of capital and skills acquisition that may not be possible for women from poor families. For example, women who have computers in their homes and are internet and cyber savvy can conduct tutorials from their homes for children in the US, Europe and Gulf countries.

The world of women and work is complex and women often combine work, family and household responsibilities. Strangely enough, while this was traditionally a characteristic of informal sector and agricultural work, it is now increasingly visible among middle and higher class women because of modern information technologies.

There appears to not yet be a systematic effort by national and international bodies to understand the way women's work is shaped by different national regional and global trends; the stresses on women created by different globalisation forces, and; the costs and benefits to women of different class, race and cultural backgrounds and geographic locations by the expansion of global capitalism and neoliberal policy regimes. UNIFEM did a report on the Progress of the World's Women several years ago, but there has been no follow-up after that from the UN agencies.

Some Issues for Discussion

Some questions that come to mind regarding women and work in today's global economic scenario:

1. Which women (in terms of economic class, geographic location, social backgrounds, etc.)

- have access to the education and skills basket needed to take advantage of the present 'information society?'
2. What types of jobs are women in the South getting in the global marketplace?
 3. In what types of jobs are most women in the South concentrated?
 - What are the wage levels in these jobs?
 - What are the working conditions?
 - How secure are these jobs?
 4. What are the national policies in place to ensure that women—especially from economically vulnerable backgrounds—get safe and decent employment with appropriate and equal wages and benefits?
 5. Who is advocating for the rights of women workers in both blue and white collar jobs and how? How effective has this advocacy been?
 6. How responsive are policy makers to ensuring and protecting the rights of women workers?
 7. What needs to be done to increase women's access to education and skills to be able to benefit from today's information society?'