

Women and Globalisation

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Abstract: It is unfortunate that the result of globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation policies has been an intensification of poverty and unemployment, with a general deflation in the economy leading to a lowering of real wages and interest rates. The fact is that existing inequalities within the Indian society have been exacerbated. The fate of women has become worse.

Keywords: Globalisation, capitalism, homogenisation, culture, exploitation.

This article examines 'Globalisation' from a gender perspective. It firsts sets out an understanding of the term 'globalisation', and then tries to describe and analyse its effect on women in the particular context of India.

Globalisation °

The term 'Globalisation' is now widely used to describe the current phase of economic activity on a world scale. However, the term itself is contentious, with diversity in definition and interpretation. There are some who see it as an inevitable stage in the continuum of the process of global economic development, while others argue that it is nothing but another form of imperialism. However, this is not simply a matter of semantic debate, because as with all economic processes, globalisation has very deep consequences for the lives of real people. These consequences depend on where these people are located, in terms of region, class, race, caste and gender. Any analysis of the impact of globalisation will in turn be influenced by the terms of this location. We therefore need to define our perspective about globalisation at the outset, in order to locate its impact on women in a particular framework.

In descriptive terms, globalisation refers to the marked increase in the flow of goods and services, capital, technology and information across nations in the last few decades. In terms of structure, it refers to a set of interrelated processes of global capitalist production. Those who prefer to see these processes as neutral view them as leading to the creation of a 'global village' and the development of a global civil society and polity, the rise of multilateralism, cosmopolitanism and the emergence of a popular global culture, all based on a transnational economy and a new global division of labour. Within this perspective is embedded a sense of historic inevitability, as a result of which the consequences of these processes must be tolerated, or at best, adjusted with, since it is beyond the scope of anyone, individually or collectively to fundamentally change the nature and direction of these processes.

However, there is the other view of globalisation as a prescription of neo-liberal economics, which not just recommends but insists that the road to prosperity and economic development lies in the adoption of a system of free economic flows within and across nations. While both perspectives offer scope for critical evaluation, the latter affords the possibility of change, because if the prescribed model does not lead to the predicted increase in the economic welfare of people, it can and should be replaced by a feasible alternative.

From the point of view of women, historically battling against discrimination in all spheres of life, globalisation is to be examined in terms of whether it leads towards their goal of equality or away from it. Given that women are disadvantaged in terms of resources, skills and social status, and constitute the economic, social and political underclass in any society, globalisation as a process is bound to affect them in ways that are qualitatively different from other sections, particularly men. If these are negative in nature, there is certainly a case for women to rally against globalisation, and offer other alternatives that may have more positive outcomes for them. In the following sections, we examine the nature of globalisation and its specific impact on women.

A Historical Perspective: In order to understand the nature of globalisation as it exists today, it is necessary to view it in the historical perspective of world wide developments in the prior decades, particularly the post World war II period. Often known as the ‘Golden Age of Capitalism’, this period was characterised by high rates of economic growth and development in the developed capitalist countries, based on a system of mass production and aided by the welfare state that took on the responsibility to provide social security, health and education. The Great October Revolution and the alternative systems of socialist production provided the framework for a different paradigm, and the impetus to many nation states to reassert their identity. Consequently, this is also a period marked by a major process of decolonisation and the efforts of many developing countries to advance their economic and social development on the basis of self-reliant import substituting industrialisation, protection of the domestic economy and expansion of the domestic market with active state intervention in all spheres. For women across the globe, it was not only a period marked by their increasing participation in economic production, but also a recognition that it had separate and different meanings for them, as seen from the “Women/Gender and/ in Development” debates surrounding the role of women in economic development. However, by the sixties and seventies, these processes had worked themselves out to their limit, both in developed and developing countries. The world capitalist system was once again in a crisis, with over production and over capacity, requiring a search for new markets and ways and means of enhancing declining profitability. On the other hand, socialist economies were themselves in a crisis, due to several reasons, which included the costs and burdens of the Cold War, and their inability to develop structures that could contribute to the deepening of socialist democracy. Seeking ways out of this crisis, aided by the collapse of socialist systems of production, world capitalism has entered a new and qualitatively different phase, with the following major characteristics.

The internationalisation of capital

In particular, the internationalisation of capital assisted by the development of information technology has taken on an increasingly speculative form. Starting with speculative transactions in foreign

currency exchange rates, the last decade has seen a remarkable increase in newer forms of speculative financial instruments, also known as derivatives, which dominate international capital flows. According to one estimate, for every US Dollar that circulates in the real economy, \$25-50 circulate in the world of pure finance, and less than 5% of circulating capital has any productive function. The replacement of traditional 'aid' by 'trade' and the increasing role played by loans in financing development projects in developing countries, has also contributed to the increasing vulnerability of these economies to the whims and fancies of this speculative international capital that can flow from one end of the globe to another in a fraction of time.

The internationalisation of the division of labour:

This period has also seen the rise of transnational corporations based on an extreme division and subdivision of production processes across countries, with technological transformations that have raised productivity but more than disproportionately reduced the number of workers; the world of labour has been progressively on the defensive, its ability to negotiate curtailed and weakened in the past few years.

The rise of supra-national institutions of governance:

Another marked feature has been the increasingly interventionist role of the world financial institutions, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and, after its formation in 1994, the World Trade Organisation, which are taking economic decisions that were so far the domain of domestic policy makers. While some may perceive this as the decline of the nation state, in fact the ruling class in many countries are actually in active collaboration with these supra-national bodies, because it suits their own class interests.

A fundamental shift from the paradigm of state agency to that of the market

Finally, the new philosophy of globalisation marks a shift from the state to the market, from the public to the private, from intervention to the 'free' play of economic forces, which sees the role of the

state as simply a facilitator for the markets that are fundamental providers of all human needs. Even the traditional role of the state as the defender of the nation state is now eroded, as world capitalism increasingly assumes a neo-imperialist role, willing to use brute military power for satisfying its accumulative instincts, as was seen in the war against Iraq last year.

The rise of fundamentalism and social fragmentation

Accompanying these, are other social and cultural phenomena, which are interrelated in a complex manner to the economic process of globalisation. In particular, one must note the rise of fundamentalist ideologies across the world, which not only divert attention from the adverse effects of globalisation, but feed on the fragmentation that is in reality the character of a globalised society, strengthening identities based on region, religion, community, race and caste, rather than the class (and gender) consciousness of a people facing poverty and unemployment.

The homogenisation of culture

Additionally, there is the development of a global media that perpetuates a homogenised culture that stereotypes and packages the goods and services that capital wants to sell in the market, destroying the individuality and diversity of cultures developed over centuries across different parts of the world. This must also be taken into account while analysing the impact of globalisation, which must not be seen as a purely economic phenomenon.

From a Gender Perspective

Markets, as historical experience indicates, are not neutral. The outcomes of market processes depend on the initial distribution of resources, and in unequal societies market forces affect different groups in the social spectrum differently. It is the state that can intervene and redress the unequal balance of economic and social power. However, the neutralisation of the state in the globalisation process means that all disadvantaged sections, be it the poor, women, dalits, tribals, minorities, and those who are discriminated against in modern society. They are thus at the receiving end of the economic proc-

esses that cause unemployment and deflation, but also lose the protective cover of the state. Women, as we have noted earlier, constitute one section which is caught in a myriad of ways in the process of globalisation. In the following sections, we examine the impact of globalisation on women in general and then in the particular context of India.

Impact of Globalisation on Women

Broadly speaking, we can identify certain major aspects of women's lives that are being directly transformed due to the processes of globalisation. These are work, labour and leisure, the social reproduction of labour, food and social security, health, education, etc. As the globalisation process seeps in further, we may be able to identify other areas that will emerge with time. We must also take into account the indirect impact of growing fundamentalism, that is also linked to the globalisation process, which destroys the identity of women as women, and puts in place instead a fragmented identity based on community, which can then be defined in terms of religion, region, caste, race, ethnic origin, etc, depending on what the ruling class requires at a particular moment in time. We must also note the cultural impact of globalisation that stereotypes women as objects for sale in a universal market, and objects that can help to sell other goods and services.

Work, Labour and Leisure: There is now a wealth of literature on the impact of globalisation on women's work and labour. It is too large a body of work to review here, but we can summarise the major conclusions as follows:

Globalisation is increasing the existing gender divide in the world of work and labour. As we all know too well, women's labour has always been ignored, considered supplementary and subsidiary, despite the fact that the volume and intensity of women's work in society is higher. However, since much of it has been within the family or household enterprises, and it is therefore unpaid, it has remained invisible and undervalued. As globalisation entails 'job-less growth', in many countries, women are losing whatever jobs they had in the organised sector, the last to be hired and the first to be fired. Privatisation of public sector enterprises, downsizing, vol-

untary retirement schemes, all contribute to more and more women losing jobs that entailed minimum wages and social security benefits.

However, since most women have to work, either to support themselves or their families, they cannot afford to be unemployed, and most women therefore seek any kind of work that is available, despite the fact that the offer wage may be far below their norm in circumstances. However, the nature of the new jobs created by the new international division of labour is such that most of them are subcontracted through a complex network of labour contractors, piece-meal and piece-rated, with no job security.

In fact much of it is home based, on the specious argument that it enables women to look after their children and simultaneously do housework. Home work actually increases the double burden of women, because tasks that might have been taken on by other family members, especially men, become their sole responsibility. There is no restriction on working hours, and often, older and younger women share in the home work, converting it into 'family' labour. Women also have to contribute in terms of other inputs (for example, electricity, costs of repair and maintenance of tools, etc.) and the net result is a much lower real wage rate than would be available in a factory, that would be bound by at least a minimum of labour legislation.

In fact, the hard won protective legislation is sought to be done away with under globalisation, arguing that it inflates labour costs and therefore makes production uncompetitive. Many national governments attract capital into so called Free Trade Zones and Export Processing Zones by offering them production areas free from labour legislation. Many multinationals screen women employees to ensure that they are not pregnant, because it increases their labour costs, and some even prefer to employ women only in a specific age group of 18-25 years. Night work is now being introduced in many countries and since there is often no other work available, many women are accepting it, causing grave problems to their health.

Another dramatic change in the nature of women's work and employment patterns is the tremendous increase in migration, within

countries and across national borders. This is to be noted because traditionally women were the last to migrate, given the constraints of family responsibilities and social taboo on migration and women living alone. This has rapidly changed in the last few decades. Unfortunately, there is a rather thin dividing line between migration and trafficking, and women migrating for work often face extreme exploitation, since many of them are particularly vulnerable, living in insecure and often illegal circumstances. This has also led to the demand by some for the recognition of 'sex' work as any other form of work, since women opt to be in it as a matter of 'choice'. This argument belies the fact that many are forced into this kind of work because no other type is actually available, and a large number are actually victims of exploitation, as seen from the fact that very large numbers are minors. Sex work also has many dimensions, from 'body shops' to 'mail order brides'. All women must be freed of exploitation of all types, and there is a strong case for legalisation of prostitution in many countries, but to equate it with other types of work is to strip it of its demeaning nature.

The generally increased work burden means that women have very little time for leisure, so necessary for human welfare. Leisure is then confined to the stuff churned out by the corporatised media, through the television soaps, propagating a certain lifestyle and concepts of how leisure time should be spent, which are infact reinforcing global cultural homogeneity (such as theme parks, shopping malls, etc).

Social Reproduction of Labour: One of the most important aspects of equal status for women is the sharing of domestic burdens either within the household, or by the state, but globalisation actually puts the onus on women. The social reproduction of labour increasingly becomes their responsibility, as the state withdraws from crucial sectors such as child care, caring for the aged, when social sector budgets are cut in the name of reduction in fiscal deficit.. This 'privatisation' of social reproduction is also done by charging higher user fees for social services. In times of falling incomes, women and girl children and even senior citizens step in to avoid these higher costs, taking on what should in fact be done by the state.

Food and Social Security, Health and Education: Since women are one of the most vulnerable sections, they are often dependent on the state to provide them with basic economic and social services. Traditional gender discrimination is sought to be countered by positive measures to provide education and health opportunities to women, or food security systems that assist them in their task of providing for the family. However, the withdrawal of the state and the primacy of the market means that women lose out in terms of social security. Since women are not able to afford priced services, they are forced to opt, and end up being denied access to health, education, housing, pensions, etc.

Growing Fundamentalism: As women battle with the economic fundamentalism of the market, they also face growing attacks on their basic liberties from fundamentalist forces. As mentioned earlier, these forces feed on the discontent bred with the adverse impact of globalisation. On the one hand, these forces emphasize fragmented identities based on religion, race, caste, etc, destroying the collectivity of people and their potential to resist these policies. On the other hand, they posit the concept of the 'other' community that is seen as being responsible for the economic hardship of the majority. Usually these ideologies are opposed to women's participation in public life and social production and advocate the primary role of women within the home. This becomes extremely convenient in a period when employment opportunities are declining and social services are being cut; women need no longer work, but should do domestic work and look after the children and engage in social reproduction instead.

Objectification of Women: Globalisation spawns the extreme objectification of women. Aided by modern technology, women become mere repositories of value, so much so that even reproduction loses its human dimension, as women become production centres for made to order babies. The media pushes the image of women as consumers, making 'independent choices' about the purchase of goods and services, but leaving all other life choices such as their education and the nature of their employment to the mercy of the market.

Thus, evaluated from the point of view of the long road to equality, it is quite clear that globalisation is inimical to women. The ex-

perience of women across the globe, in both developed and developing countries is similar, which also explains why so many women are today at the forefront of the struggle against globalisation.

Neo-Liberal Market Reforms in India

1991 marks a turning point in the economic history of India, when the minority Congress government led by Prime Minister Narsimha Rao accepted the conditionalities of the IMF loan taken to tide over a foreign exchange crisis caused by import profligacy in the preceding period. These conditionalities, which some call the 'New Economic Policy' were the garb under which the IMF introduced "Structural Adjustment Policies" in the country. SAP was the guise under which neo-liberal economic 'reforms' were introduced, rolling back almost four and a half decades of Nehruvian economic policies based on self-reliance, import substitution, a strong public sector and a social policy of nationalism, secularism and some kind of positive discrimination for disadvantaged sections, particularly Dalits, Adivasis, and to some extent women. In brief, the major changes in Indian economic policy in the last 10-15 years can be summarised as:

- A reduction in fiscal deficit, based on reduction in expenditure on the social sector
- A policy of deregulation of the industrial sector, with greater freedom for international and domestic capital to enter various arenas
- Trade Liberalisation, particularly lifting of import controls
- Privatisation of the existing public sector and of new infrastructure projects
- Reforms in Agriculture to remove input subsidies and land deregulation
- Financial sector reforms
- Devaluation of the rupee, making imports expensive and exports cheaper

It must also be noted that there was a remarkable political consensus amongst the ruling classes, the big bourgeoisie and the rural landowning elite in India, about the nature of these neo-liberal reforms, because it suited their class interests in terms of helping to find new avenues for profitability by linking up with the global economy. As a result, whatever the composition of the ruling political formation, all national governments in the period since neo-liberal reforms were first introduced have supported the process. If anything, the first ruling coalition led by the BJP has shown a larger propensity to implement these policies with greater zeal, and in deference to western interests led by the United States.

Fifteen years after these processes set in, the overall assessment of globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation (LPG) policies has been an intensification of poverty and unemployment, with a general deflation in the economy leading to a lowering of real wages and interest rates. Despite the fact that the government continues to paint a rosy picture of the economy, “India shining” being the latest turn in its phraseology of selling reforms to the people. The fact is that existing inequalities within Indian society have been exacerbated. India is therefore shining for a handful, the urban and rural elite who gained from economic reform, not for those who have lost jobs due to the economic downturn as industries close down and not for those farmers who have to resort to suicides when input costs become prohibitive and debt burdens are too crushing. The question is: Where do women stand in all this? How is globalisation to be seen through women’s eyes?

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