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IIRF/IIRE
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Series editor: Peter Drucker
Design: Richard Bastiaans
Layout: Robert Went
### Women's Lives in the New Global Economy

*Foreward, Penny Duggan and Heather Dashner*

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Foreward

by Penny Duggan & Heather Dashner

A fundamental feature of the global social and economic situation today is the capitalist drive to reorganize the global economy and increase profitability. Since the search for profits is the organizing principle of capitalist society, this necessarily has much broader effects than simply on the "labour process" in the narrow sense of organizing work within factories and other workplaces.

To understand how this process works and how capitalism hopes to achieve its ends, we also have to look at how gender relations are used to facilitate this reorganization.

This series of contributions is the product of the work of the International Institute for Research and Education over several years in international and regional sessions devoted to examining questions of women's place in society today. Women activists look at different aspects of the question and from different standpoints in the global economy today: Asia, South Africa, Latin America, North America and Western Europe.

All the contributions examine the relationship of women's place in the labour market to women's family responsibilities, within a given social context. Some focus more specifically on the sexual division of labour at work, while others look more broadly at how women's role and family relations figure in a more general discourse on the capitalist crisis and its "solutions".

The collection begins with a joint contribution by women from three continents. Mariela Barbosa (Uruguay), Heather Dashner (Mexico), Penny Duggan (France), Carol McAllister (US) and Eva Nikell (Sweden) draw out some general features of the impact of capitalist restructuring on women's lives. They also show how gender oppression has been an essential tool for capitalists to justify their policies and to shift responsibility for social welfare from state and collective institutions to the "privacy" of the family.

The contribution from Ida Dequeecker from Belgium looks at the forms of "work redistribution" proposed by employers in the advanced capitalist countries and the debate this poses in terms of the relationship between work and income. This is of particular importance for women at a time when various forms of "mother's wage" are being considered as a viable option for taking women out of the labour market (and notably the unemployment figures) and cutting state spending by saving on the payment of unemployment benefits and child-care provision.
Eva Nikell traces the development of the "Swedish model", women's gains on the job and in child care, and the effects of these gains on Swedish society as a whole. She shows how the dismantling of Sweden's welfare system is undermining those gains today.

Two contributions, from Turkey and Mexico, look at the situation of workers in dependent economies that are turned towards supplying an export market, and the conditions of exploitation for the majority of the work-force — women — that this entails. G. Zeynep explains that the Turkish military coup of 1980, not any kind of democratization, heralded the establishment of export-oriented industry and enormous changes in the lives of women, who migrated to the cities and entered the work-force in unprecedented numbers. Carmen Valadez details the relationship between Mexico's growing maquiladora industry, gender oppression and environmental destruction in the context of the recently signed North American Free Trade Agreement.

Rita Edwards from South Africa tackles the interrelationship of race, class and gender in this society and its effects on the possibility of the vast majority of South African women, blacks, organizing to fight for gender-specific demands.

In an important contribution from India, Trupti Shah and Bina Srinivasan polemicize against the notion that forms of gender violence such as dowry deaths and female feticide are "remnants" of a "backward" society that will die away with the development of education and modernization. Rather, they demonstrate how precisely it is the development of capitalism within India itself that has led to the extension and exacerbation of these forms of violence.

Carol McAllister illustrates how Malaysia's export-oriented economy affects Malay women's everyday lives, both in factory work and in their traditional rural communities. She explains how they are trying to resist some of the worst aspects of the changes in their lives, through means based on their traditional culture rather than "Western" forms of political activism.

Finally, family historian Stephanie Coontz from the United States turns specifically to the much-touted "crisis of the family". She does not hesitate to tackle the question on the same level as those right-wing ideologues who bemoan the crisis of the "traditional" family because it has
cut away traditional relations of obligation and support. Arguing that changing economic and social factors have simply revealed the inadequacy of the traditional family as a basis for community, and acknowledging the personal pain that is felt by many in the break-up of their traditional family, Coontz argues that what is necessary is to reconstruct new, more moral, frames of reference, leading to an identification with class and community rather than simply family.

These contributions are very diverse. However, their common approach illustrates how political and social activists working within a shared frame of reference can begin to use their different experiences to develop a truly international analysis of the processes at work today, processes which both use and reinforce existing gender inequalities while also creating the contradictions that stimulate women’s challenge to them.
Introduction: Women and Economic Integration

Restructuring and integration of the global capitalist economy— including the recent imposition of so-called structural adjustment policies involving austerity measures, privatization of the economy and deregulation of the market—and the current moves toward establishing formal trade blocks through NAFTA, the EU and MERCOSUR, have particular impacts on women in both dependent and advanced capitalist countries. Equally important, these economic transformations and their role in undermining the political strength of the international working class depend precisely on the continuing oppression and exploitation of women. This latter point must be grasped to adequately understand the fundamental dynamics involved.

Broadly speaking, the formal trade blocks, with their goals of downward “harmonization” of economic and social policies to remove barriers to the free movement of capital, the search for cheap labour and the maximization of profits, simply codify and deepen trends already well underway.

While there are regional variations, we can point to some general implications for women and some gendered aspects of integration. We have grouped them in the areas of work, health and welfare, social gains, sexuality, and ideology:

Women’s Work. The overall implications of economic integration for women’s work has been to promote contradictory proletarianization of women on a world scale, forcing them into the work-force and at the same time using their role in the family and society to justify job insecurity and casualization and the return of many private services to the “private” sphere of the family, to be shouldered by women.

Today’s international capitalist restructuring involves the development of export-processing industrialization by multinational corporations whereby parts of the production process (usually those that are low-skilled and labour-intensive) are located in free-trade zones throughout the Third World. These zones represent localized models of what the new trading blocks will create on a broader regional basis. Industries in these free-trade zones depend on the particular exploitation of women’s labour to provide the increase in surplus-value and in profits that is the goal of global restructuring. As a result, a significant layer of Third World women are brought into industrial production and in fact into some of the most modern sectors of the economy, though under very exploitative conditions. However, this development has also been accompanied by a huge expansion of the informal sector into which most women workers, including those who have been laid off from multinational industries because of age or pregnancy, are channelled. In fact, women’s work in the informal sector is used to underwrite the “cheapness” and “flexibility” of both male and female labour in the industrial sector and to provide a safety valve for periodic retrenchments in that sector. This trend toward informal-sector work is accelerated...
by the increasing commercialization and export-orientation of local agriculture, a shift which frequently undermines women’s role in the more traditional farming economy.

In the advanced capitalist centers, there has been a shift of the job market away from industrial work toward service-sector employment, drawing large numbers of women into the low-paid “pink-collar ghetto”. This shift has been accomplished without massive disruption by building off of the gendered division of labour in the family. Thus it was women who played the key role in holding families together through periods of unemployment and economic stress, and also women who more readily took up the new low-wage jobs in response to their feelings of responsibility for family survival. This expansion of the service sector has been combined with a new phase of industrial development in the U.S., Canada and Western Europe, depending largely on the labour of immigrant women. These women, vulnerable because of the combined factors of gender, race and immigrant status, often work in small workshops or at home, signalling the revival of turn-of-the-century sweatshops and the putting-out system. Such fragmentation and casualization of women’s industrial work, which is paralleled by the trend toward temporary and part-time employment in the service sector, is a central component of capital’s strategy of creating a “contingent” or “flexible” work-force.

Structural adjustment policies, and the resulting rise in unemployment, have served to drive women disproportionately out of the formal economy while also increasing their need to find some kind of income-producing work. They thus turn to the informal sector where women are increasingly forced to take jobs as day labourers, street vendors or prostitutes. In some Third World countries, unemployment has reached such proportions that men and women are now competing over informal-sector jobs, thus removing even this safety net for women.

The establishment of formal trade agreements will most certainly accelerate these developments, leading to a further “maquiladorization” of women’s work in both advanced capitalist and Third World societies. One of their basic aims – aside from ensuring certain rules for capital flow and investment, while highly regulating other things like patents – will be to generalize the elimination of certain regulations of working conditions and labour relations which have not already been eliminated, using the argument that their maintenance would constitute “unfair trade practices”. Undoubtedly, then, we would see challenges to rights such as:

• the right to safe, decent working conditions. Hazardous conditions in both industry and services where women are concentrated already exist – for example, danger from the use of toxic chemicals in electronics factories, fires in garment sweatshops, and the rise in stress-related injury for clerical workers using computers.

• retirement age requirements may be “harmonized” as is already being foreseen in Uruguay, where MERCOSUR could raise women’s retirement age by seven to nine years to jibe with Brazil’s higher age.

• maternity leave with pay, as well as child care, both legal rights in Mexico, could be eliminated formally by NAFTA.

• affirmative-action programmes, a hard-won right for both people of colour and women in the U.S. and Canada, could be challenged as an undue burden on capitalists in both countries, prejudicing their competitiveness.

In the agricultural sector, NAFTA and the EU will promote the domination of agribusiness, leading to peasant women’s further loss of this economic base.

Health and Welfare. These changes in conditions and security of work directly affect women’s health and general well-being as well as the welfare of those family members (especially children and the elderly) for whom women are primarily responsible. Rising prices and unemployment put stress on women’s own ability to provide for basic needs, while cut-backs in public spending and the dismantling of social
welfare programmes decrease state support for services such as education, health care and child care. This development is particularly deleterious to women because of their perceived role in both social and biological reproduction. At the same time, the state depends on women to "take up the slack" and provide on a private basis services that were previously provided by the government, thus furthering the process of structural adjustment.

NAFTA in particular threatens to unleash new health hazards for women as it opens the way to challenging existing environmental laws as "unfair trade practices". For example, in certain communities on the U.S.-Mexican border, the problem of toxic wastes is already linked to cancers of the female reproductive system and to severe birth defects such as anencephalic children. With the general weakening of environmental regulations, such problems could become more widespread throughout North America. At the same time, NAFTA will pose a challenge to the national health-care programmes of Canada and Mexico while making it more difficult to establish a comparable programme in the U.S. While this affects the whole of the working class, women, as primary consumers of health-care services and as those mainly responsible for family health, will be particularly hard hit. In the case of the EU as well, health care and other components of the state welfare system could be gradually chipped away.

Social Gains and Basic Rights. Closely related to the question of health and welfare is the effect of economic restructuring and the new trade policies on the social gains women have fought for over the past quarter-century, and in relation to which they have won at least partial victories. These include the right to reproductive freedom (including the right to abortion), the right to equal pay, and the right to freedom from sexual harassment and violence.

While the general economic crisis has already generated serious attacks on women's rights, formal trade agreements have the potential to undermine these rights in a more formal and thorough-going way. This is largely a result of the supranational and corporate-dominated decision-making structures proposed in these agreements, which will supersede regular legislative and executive actions. This, combined with the focus on "unfair trade practices", sets up a situation ripe for the challenging of measures that help equalize women's role in the economy. While the reason for attacking these rights may have a primarily economic basis, we should note that the rights themselves help ensure women's position in many areas of society. Their significant weakening would, in fact, bring into question women's basic status as citizens. The possibility for such a development is particularly clear in North America, where NAFTA provides no guarantees for such rights. In Europe the situation is more uneven, in that the Social Charter that accompanies the EU proposal provides common European principles on these matters, thus promoting stronger measures in certain cases (e.g. Ireland and Portugal) while perhaps undermining existing laws in others (e.g. Sweden).

Sexuality. The manipulation of women's sexuality is one of the primary ways in which capitalist restructuring uses and builds on women's oppression. This happens in several ways. First, there are the attacks on sexual and reproductive rights discussed above. In this sense, such attacks can be seen as not only an effect of economic change but also as preparing the way for further restructuring by making women more vulnerable in both economic and social terms. Second, we can find numerous instances where the entry and dismissal of women from the wage-labour force, as well as the conditions of super-exploitation under which most women work, are justified by images of female sexuality. This, for example, is very common in factories where women are alternately represented as "sexually loose" and thus "free" to be exploited, or as requiring stringent controls — including the physical organization of the workplace using the threat of sexual violence — to maintain their
sexual purity, thus limiting their autonomy and mobility. Finally, there are particular instances—such as the expansion of the international sex trade in Europe, Asia and Latin America, the increase in dowry deaths in India, and the imposition of class-based population policies, for example in Singapore—in which women's sexuality is both commodified and controlled in ways that directly further the economic strategies of individual men or of capital as a whole.

**Ideology.** The ideological transformations that accompany global integration also have an impact on women. This too has several aspects. There is, for example, the manipulation of sexual images and norms we have just discussed. Also of importance is the ideological emphasis on individualism and privatization that parallels recent changes in economic relations. Because of women's traditional role in the family, such an ideological development affects them differentially—and also depends on their often unconscious collaboration to carry out such broad cultural change. Finally, there is the possibility that NAFTA and the EU will play a role in undermining both memories of and aspirations for progressive national struggles. This in turn could have special implications for women, since it is through such struggles that women's demands are frequently raised and secured. For example, to prepare the way for implementation of NAFTA there are already pressures to revise the official histories of the Mexican Revolution. Such revisions would serve to weaken the collective memory of the gains of the Revolution, including those of particular importance to women such as rights to maternity leave, child care and health care. The Irish struggle provides another example, in that the dampening of its vigour because of the renewed ideology of a common Europe could also dampen aspirations for women's emancipation connected with the goal of national liberation.
Belgium: 
As Some Women Climb the Career Ladder, Others Are Sent Back to the Kitchen

By Ida Dequeecker

Various kinds of voluntary part-time work; unpaid full-time or part-time leaves; starting work as a part-timer; early retirement; partial retirement; these are the schemes for redistributing work that the Belgian government is putting forward as part of its "Global Plan". They are one and all individual solutions. They go together with wage restraint and flexibilization. These are not new ideas: women know something about them. Women have been the targets for part-time work schemes and temporary leaves of absence for the past ten or fifteen years, as part of a massive, one-sided and unequal redistribution of work. This policy is founded on the deeply rooted conception that women can always go back to their homes and fall back on their husbands' wages. It leads to an exacerbation of the existing structural inequality - in incomes, in access to jobs and in position in the home - between women and men, as well as greater inequality among women.

If the government's proposals are adopted, these tendencies will only be reinforced. A situation will develop in which women who have good careers at high salaries can continue their emancipation, while their less fortunate sisters will be sent back home. This is a challenge for the women's movement, in which a debate over strategies for women's emancipation is once again raging.

Redistribution and Flexibilization

"An à la carte career": that's the tempting expression that federal Minister of Employment Miet Smet has come up with. She paints a picture of a society in which different kinds of work redistribution schemes can be carried out at different times during women's working lives, depending on their changing circumstances and needs.

The reality is different. As far as part-time work goes, for instance: 70 percent of those who accept this type of work have never had a chance at a full-time job.

The reason is that part-time work has become an integral part of the labour market, concentrated in traditional women's jobs (sales, housekeeping, white-collar work) and women's sectors (department stores, supermarkets, cleaning companies). After the introduction of youth "training" schemes in 1976 as a pretext for cheap labour by younger workers, part-time work became in the 1980s the spearhead of flexibilization policy. It became the employers' answer to trade-union demands for a general reduction of the work week. The government's goal was to redistribute work on a sort of average-household basis (1.5 incomes per household) and to introduce flexibilization (varying working hours, unpaid overtime (because overtime is calculated on the basis of a long-term average), keeping workers on stand-by, etc.).

As it became clear that women had little enthusiasm for part-time work, the government launched a system in 1981 called involuntary part-time work, in which people who were forced by circumstances to work part-
time received supplementary unemployment benefits for the time in which they didn't work.² After this forceful stimulus, the number of part-time workers rose in 1991 to 444,000 — 400,000 of them women.³ Only in 1989, when part-time work had taken root, did the Minister of Employment and Labour (at the time Van den Brande) begin presenting part-time work, together with temporary leaves of absence, as a means of reconciling housework and paid employment.

At the beginning of the 1990s, once part-time work had become a large-scale social phenomenon, unemployment benefits to involuntary part-time workers were cut, and the government decided that benefits could be completely cut off in cases of “abnormally” long unemployment. Since then, part-time jobs supplemented by unemployment benefits have become an endangered species. As of June 1, 1993, only “voluntary” part-time jobs exist in Belgium, and such employment is considered “appropriate” as long as it consists of at least 13 hours a week. To turn down such a job means losing one’s benefits.⁴ The right to a full-time job has thus been definitively abolished.

In 1985 the system of voluntary temporary leaves of absence was introduced for the civil service, and began to be introduced as part of private-sector union contracts. The positions left open by workers on leave (who keep their seniority rights and receive partial compensation) are filled by unemployed people, who give up their benefits in return for short-term “replacement contracts”. Once again, it is mostly women who use this system. During the month of April 1993, for example, 58,221 temporary leaves were recorded: 50,553 of the interrupted careers were women’s. In June 1993 the right to such temporary leaves of absence was introduced in the private sector as well.

The public sector has also carried out a flexibilization policy in matters of hiring and firing, again to women’s detriment. In the Flemish public sector, women make up 77 percent of public employees without job security, and only 28 percent of civil servants with job security. One third of the women are “temporary” workers, compared to only 5 percent of the men.

The current frontier in the flexibilization of women’s jobs is in home work, which has been growing for several years including in the fast-developing tertiary sector (“telecommuters” who work on computer terminals at home). But no adequate statistics are available.

Women have accordingly become the victims of a whole battery of so-called “atypical” labour contracts, which admirably suit employers’ needs for flexibility in general and flexibility in hiring and firing in particular: fixed-term contracts; temporary contracts; contracts for narrowly defined work, for temp work, for part-time work, for home work; replacement contracts for workers on leaves of absence; apprenticeship contracts. Some 20 percent of the work force is covered by this kind of contract, as opposed to the standard contract under which workers are hired for an indefinite period.

**House-to-House Cutbacks**

Today under-employment affects 1,124,000 Belgians. This is the number of all people affected in one way or another by unemployment: officially there are only about 500,000 unemployed. The majority of the under-employed are women. Women are also the majority of the long-term unemployed. Often they are assigned the status of spouse or “co-habitant”, which limits their right to unemployment benefits and elimi-

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1. The number of part-time jobs rose from 136,000 in 1973 to 216,000 in 1977, but then levelled off.
3. Almost all of this growth was due to involuntary part-time jobs — 200,000 of them.
5. Belgium is officially a federal state. Much of the public employment there does not fall under the jurisdiction of the country as a whole, but under the jurisdiction of the three regions into which it is divided: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels.
nates any protection in case of long-term unemployment.

Now that involuntary part-timers are also losing their supplementary benefits, the ranks of cut-off victims are rising rapidly. As of the end of June 1993, the unemployment office had already cut off benefits to 67,025 unemployed people, compared to “only” 57,000 such cut-offs throughout the whole of 1992. According to Minister of Employment Miet Smet, the increase is due above all to cut-offs of benefits to involuntary part-timers.

People who had been unemployed or under-employed for a long time and are not “household heads” (“breadwinners”) – i.e. mostly women – are thus being sent back to the kitchen. They are not included in official under-employment figures, which should thus be much higher than they are, particularly for women. The existence of an extensive underground network of cleaning women, babysitters, hairdressers and so on paid “under the table”, with no benefits whatsoever, testifies to the real extent of under-employment. But here again no exact statistics are available.

The project of making people’s benefits dependent on their position in the family has also spread to social insurance programmes. Family “breadwinners” (one per family maximum) are now supposed to get the most benefits; “dependents”, including many wives, are entitled to less; and “single people” come somewhere in between. For example, the summer 1993 budget talks resulted in a decision to cut seven billion Belgian francs from the health insurance sector. The proposed technique (which may or may not be implemented) is the introduction of an annual ceiling based on household income. Any health costs incurred above the ceiling would no longer be covered by health insurance, but could be deducted from taxable income. How many measures of this type are still to come? When will we reach the threshold beyond which, given a tax system that favours one-worker households, women will see greater advantages in staying home and making up for lost income with some job paid “under the table”?

Dual Society

The measures described above only affect some women. There are other women who have extensive credentials and are well-paid. Are we headed toward a society in which well-paid women can more and more easily rely on ill-paid household help, recruited from an army of jobless, unskilled women who have trouble making ends meet?

This scenario of a dual society is far from unthinkable. Some people, even feminists, are thinking about it seriously (see page 15).

Miet Smet’s idea for compulsory service (“workfare”) for the long-term unemployed, who keep their benefits and are paid a small supplement, is a step in the same direction. Those who hire these long-term unemployed as gardeners or housecleaners are even entitled to a tax deduction!

There is a real threat that women’s liberation could become an individual aspiration restricted to an upper crust of women – for whom the fight for women’s rights boils down to fighting career discrimination, sexual harassment, political discrimination, etc., but – who can always take their problems to the appropriate minister who will take the appropriate measures. From the government’s standpoint, women’s rights are limited precisely to the rights that women in this upper crust want and need. Demands such as equal access to jobs, equal pay for jobs of comparable worth, and the right to a full-time job for all have no place on this agenda.

Resignation or Resistance

During the 1970s and up until the beginning of the 1980s, the women’s movement fought unitedly and unambiguously for the right to meaningful full-time jobs and for a

drastic reduction of the work-week, both for women and men, with no cut in pay. Last year, during the Women's Day events in Turnhout, the Flemish Women's Coordinating Committee (VOK, the Flemish equivalent of the Walloon women's network but more broadly representative) reaffirmed this position.

But there are also voices in the women's movement calling for a revaluing of "women's work", for example by means of a universal, standard minimum income for everyone, male or female. Among others Mieke Vogels, member of parliament for the Green party Agalev ("For a Different Way of Life"), has emerged as an advocate of this idea. Vogels reproaches the women's movement for pursuing a male, utopian ideal (of universal, full-time employment and a universal reduction in the work-week), and for burdening women with either guilt feelings or a double work day.

Vogels undoubtedly expresses many overburdened women's frustrated yearnings for relief from too much work. But in directing her reproach against the women's movement, she is really oversimplifying. She is playing into the hands of more mainstream figures (in academic circles, the Socialist Party, etc.) who are looking for ways to keep women out of the paid work-force.

The policy of bringing women into paid employment has always been double-edged. On the one hand it is based (whether explicitly, as in the 1930s, or implicitly, as during the last twenty years) on the social prejudice that women should put their housework first. On the other hand it is a concession to employers' desire to have women's labour as well as men's available on the labour market. Women's desire for emancipation is squeezed from one side and the other between these two counterposed pressures.

During the last twenty years, women's access to paid employment has increased spectacularly. But at the same time women are still concentrated in dead-end jobs. In Belgium and the rest of the Western capitalist world (US and Western Europe), they earn on average 25-30 percent less than men, even though their wages have become indispensable to their families and they are still burdened by the well-known double work-day. This is not the fault of the women's movement, which rebels against it; it is the fault of the capitalist structure of society.

Just as a drastic reduction in the work-week will not come about by itself, neither will a universal minimum income. A shorter work-week and a universal minimum income can be weighed against one another, as alternative tools for ending inequality among human human beings.

The idea of a universal minimum income is linked to acceptance of the idea that full-time paid work for everyone is no longer possible. It follows that income and employment have to be de-linked. According to this logic, we must resign ourselves to the inequality that results from the possibility or impossibility of access to different kinds of paid work, and the possibility or impossibility of access to capital.

By contrast, the idea of a shorter work-week with no cut in pay challenges the conception of full-time work that employers are now imposing. It puts forward a different conception, starting from the will to distribute both the available work and the available wealth among all. It challenges the control of the bosses.

The definition of "full-time work" is not an objective fact; it is the outcome of a struggle between labour and capital. To back down in this fight is to give free rein to a policy that, in the face of an unprecedented structural crisis, abolishes the objectives formerly proclaimed (or at least given lip service) of everyone's right to full-time work and to a livable income. To back down now is to accept a policy that seems directed toward forcing thousands of women back to the kitchen.
Applause Under the Table

Mieke van Haegendoren, Socialist Party member and president of the Belgian National Women's Council, has no hesitation in hailing work paid under the table, both as a source of income for women and as a cost-cutting opportunity for the government.

Here's what she says:

"Unemployment, which has been rampant since the 1980s, would have led to serious social conflicts if it hadn't been made up for by other household income, for example by jobs paid under the table. Work in the domestic service sector also lightens the government's burden of a certain number of tasks, such as child care and elder-care."

The difficult task of combining housework with paid work thus becomes less necessary.... Women's work in the formal sector of modern society is becoming easier, not because men are helping more with housework, but because women working in the formal sector are aided by an extensive underground network of household help. Or to formulate it otherwise: beneath women's participation in the formal sector, a large informal sector is growing up." (De Standaard, 23 Sept. 1993)
Sweden: Death of a Model?

By Eva Nikell

Thanks to a distinctive 20th-century history, Swedish society today offers women unusual opportunities for combining work and parenthood. But economic integration and globalization are putting an end to the conditions on which the “Swedish model” was founded. Today, rather than Sweden’s offering Europe and the world a “model”, the gains that Swedish women have made over the past half-century are under attack.

A few figures show how unusual the situation of Swedish women has become:

- More women than ever before in modern Western history are active in the official work market in Sweden: 84 percent. (For men the figure is 88 percent.) Among women aged 25-54 years old, over 90 percent are in the work-force. (95 percent for men; data from 1992.)

- Yet at the same time, Swedish women are near the top of the list in Western Europe in terms of having children. Only Ireland has a higher birthrate. While the birthrate in Sweden fell in the 1970s to an all-time low, 11 children per 1000 inhabitants in 1983, that trend was broken in the mid-1980s. By 1992 the figure was 2.1 children per woman, and it remains that high. Today more women than ever in Sweden bear children.

- In the words of Ann-Sofie Ohlander, professor in social and economic history in Uppsala, Sweden has finally created the “two-parent family” — meaning that fathers have started taking on an organized responsibility for their children. Today 37 percent of all fathers use at least some of the parental leave benefit to be with their children. Fathers use 9.1 percent of the total benefit time, which is remarkable given the fact that most women breastfeed during at least 6-7 months of the 12 months available.

How was this development possible? Why is it now threatened? Were there systematic, structural weaknesses that explain the current backlash against Swedish women?

Centralization and Industrial Explosion

Since World War II, Sweden has been known as a sort of model state for welfare and equality, not only between women and men but in a broader context, as a “third road to a socially just and economically sound society”.

In fact there have been certain characteristics of the “Swedish model” that for a long time seemed to work well. What is particularly interesting is the combination of a highly centralized economy with a strong state structure and rapid social development because of a late and quick industrialization.

The new industrial bourgeoisie that was created through rapid industrialization had to confront a likewise rapidly growing and socially strong new working class. Industrialization began around 1850, but in 1870 there were still only 65,000 industrial workers in...
the country. The explosion came in 1890. In 1900 there were 300,000 industrial workers in Sweden. Thirty years later there were one million: one sixth of the total population.

By the end of the Second World War – only fifty years later – this massive industrial restructuring of the economy had been completed. Since Sweden kept out of the war, its industrial base was saved from destruction. Moreover, the business that was done before and throughout the war – without any moral inhibitions on the part of the ruling coalition government – had strengthened Swedish industrial capital.

Highly specialized, with a good technological standard, Swedish industry plunged into the new markets created by postwar decolonization and reconstruction.

Constructing the Working-Class Family

In many ways, though, Sweden was still a rural country: thinly populated, with an area as big as France or Spain but only a few million inhabitants. In the 1930s, slow population growth and a declining birthrate caused alarm. The “nation” was supposedly in danger. State-designed family policies were introduced as a means of “saving the nation”, i.e. increasing the frequency of marriages and the birthrate.

The marriage rate and birthrate had fallen in direct proportion to the growth of the industrial working class from 1830 on. From 30 children per 1000 inhabitants in 1800-70, the figure went down to only 13 children per 1000 inhabitants in 1933-34. This drop caused a national debate over “the population crisis”, introduced by internationally known social democrats Gunnar and Alva Myrdal.

As a result, two different kinds of political measures were adopted.

New social services eased the family burden of caretaking and education: schools for everyone; free food and books for schoolchildren; free medical check-ups for all children; the first crèches; and so on. At the same time, families received direct aid: housing credits, tax reductions, housing benefits for big families, free obstetrical care in hospitals, and early forms of maternity leave.

Economically, the aim was to benefit marriage and childbirth within the young industrial proletariat. This was seen as a necessity in order to secure the reproduction of future workers, as proletarianization of the poor in the countryside had ended. Family policies were economic tools for the future.

Ideologically, the aim was to strengthen family ideals and marriage among the whole of the population. Alva Myrdal proposed marital and sexual education to reach this goal, since there were “not many economic incentives to get married and [it was] hard for young people to get inspired by the dull marriages of their parents.”

The 1935 Population Commission was the first of many, 1941, 1954, 1955, 1962, 1967, 1968, 1969... all these years have seen family planning commissions on a national scale. Behind those investigations and commissions lay the need to support a family institution that cannot sustain itself on its own.

Strengthening Industry and the Good Life

What really happened from 1930 to 1960 was the final institutionalization of the working-class family, a structure that was codified and protected by the state. It reached its absolute height in the 1950s and early ‘60s, “the decade of the housewives”, when ordinary working-class households could afford to have a mother and wife staying at home.

The workers’ movement, or at least the male working class, saw the working-class housewife as its particular victory. Young social-democratic men were the fiercest opponents in parliament of “a married woman’s right
to work", as the proposal was called in the 1920s. Three social-democratic members of parliament wrote in a motion in 1927 that "a woman can only serve one master at a time", referring to the 19th-century bourgeois family as the ideal.

But "a married woman’s right to work" was finally won in 1939 through a law that prohibited employers from firing women who got married or became pregnant. The victory was won after a hard battle and much networking among women politicians in different political parties – and through a special mixture of realpolitik and vision that characterized social democracy, which governed or dominated the government from 1932 to 1976.

Realpolitik meant fulfilling the needs of big industry, especially export-oriented industry. Family policies were still seen as a means to support big business. But the practical goals shifted. A bigger labour force was needed, and the choice was between "women or imported labour". With an argument – again – about the need to "save the Swedish nation", the politicians chose women. Hence the need to enlarge the public sector. There were arguments in parliamentary documents in the early 1950s about the need to build crèches as a "means to strengthen Swedish export industry".

The visionary side of politics after 1945 was mainly formulated by women politicians, who had been fighting for decades to get the ear of decision-making circles. Their vision included women’s right to work and to have an independent economic status. They had ideas about broader education and better cultural work, about collective housing and services that could lead to a good life for everyone. They thought that modern child care should free children from the dominant influence of their parents, and therefore that child care and schooling were not only means to let women work but also something good in themselves for children.

Alva Myrdal, then ambassador to the UN, also preached that women, both as housewives and workers, should be educated, and that their work should be professionalized. With modern equipment and modern pedagogy, women’s work should be seen as a work of great social importance, whether it was done inside or outside the home.

While this vision was constructed from the top down, and always coincided with what suited big business, it inspired reforms that have had fundamental effects on the Swedish society – as the figures given at the beginning of this article show.

**Benefits and Limits of the Public Sector**

Swedish women’s mass entry into the official labour market began in the mid-1960s. Enlargement of the public sector began an expansion of the whole of the work market that is extraordinary in relation to other countries.

This expansion has been beneficial to the Swedish economy in many ways. For example, the public sector kept employment high during industrial restructuring in the early 1980s (in shipbuilding, steel, mining, etc). Structural mass unemployment did not hit Sweden as hard as Britain or continental Europe. Through the 1980s unemployment in Sweden never rose above 3 percent. (Today the national figure is 8-10 percent.)

At the same time, the "female GNP" that came from a highly-skilled and professionalized work-force in health, education, care-taking and other service sectors of the economy enriched the whole of the economy. As the public sector grew, so did the number of women employed in the official work-force. There is a strong connection between the size of the public sector – in percentage of GNP – and the proportion of women aged 16-65 who are in the work-force.

The rising birth rate at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s signalled the success of the national plan for child care. In 1991 the goals were reached. In principle, any parents that wanted a crèche for their
children could have one. Apparently this meant that women (and men), for the first
time since the mass entry of women into the
work-force began, had real possibilities of
combining waged work with having small
children.

Looking back, we can conclude that the
"birth-strike" from 1975-85 was a reflection
of the hard times Swedish women had in
that period if they wanted to be both workers
and mothers. (We see the same develop-
ment today in Italy, Japan and other coun-
tries where these two conflicting expecta-
tions clash.)

Ironically, just as the national child-care
plan achieved its goals, it began to unravel.
The right-wing government that came to
power in September 1991 began re-organiz-
ing and closing child-care centers, reducing
personnel, undermining safety and quality,
so that many parents are now hesitant to
leave their children in municipal crèches.

Moreover, as a result of large-scale internal
migration, many Swedes are uprooted from
their home region. There are few networks
of neighbours or blood relations to fall back
on. Swedish women have therefore become
extremely dependent on well-functioning
social services.

The "Two-Parent Family" in
Jeopardy

Another interesting aspect of the Swedish
model is what historians call "the two-par-
ent family". Many Swedish men take more
responsibility for the daily care of their
children than in many other countries. As with
child care and other public services, howev-
er, the economic foundations of this
achievement are threatened in the 1990s.

The main pre-condition for the two-parent
family was the system of long, parental
leaves with pay (12 months with 90 percent
of income for the parents, used by the moth-
er or the father any way they want, plus 60
days with 60 Swedish crowns/day supple-
mental – paid with tax revenues like
unemployment benefits or other social ben-
efits).

Since 1979, parents with children under 12
years old have a legal right to work only six
hours a day or make other arrangements for
a 30-hour work week. Wages are reduced
proportionally. Parts of the long parental
leave period can be extended as reduced
working time over a couple of years. There is
also a possibility for parents, mothers or
fathers, to take up to 60 days leave a year per
child to care for their sick children. The ben-
efit is 90 percent of income.

Together with national campaigns about the
need for fathers and children to have more
time together, and special incentives in
many big workplaces for fathers who exer-
cise their right to parental leave, this combi-
nation of reforms has meant a small revolu-
tion in many people's minds.

One visible effect of this "revolution" is that
a majority of all parents today split responsi-
bilities for the children half-and-half if they
divorce. Another interesting development is
that about 50 percent of all the days used to
care for sick children are used by fathers.
Many men have come to see that their chil-
dren are as important as their work, and that
there are more things to life than work or
careers. Men in industrial workplaces have
also noticed that their wives or companions
are more crucial to the work-process than
they are (if the women for instance work in
hospitals, schools or child care...).

Ironically, again, at the very moment when
this fundamental reform shows positive
results, it is threatened by social cuts.

The proposal right now (February 1994) is to
reduce the income benefit in the parental
leave system to only 80 percent. Such a
move means a definite turning-back of the
clock, since women earn substantially less
than men, and therefore the whole family
would lose less if the woman stays at home
longer. This proposal comes from the bour-
geois government in a new family policy
deal, but it is also supported by the social-
women’s lives in the global economy

democratic opposition because “there is no economic choice”.

To make this reversal a little less serious there is also a proposal about a compulsory “daddy’s month” within the system (a requirement that fathers take at least one month out of the twelve possible during a seven-year period, or else lose their parental leave altogether). This proposal will have little practical effect on gender equality. The risk is that it will only stir up conflict in the population, and perhaps halt the positive attitudes that had so far been created around the whole notion of “father’s responsibilities”.

Why do the achievements of Swedish family policy seem to be so easily jeopardized?

For Women, Part-Time Work and Segregation

One fundamental weakness that has contributed to undermining the Swedish model from within is the continuing inequality of women in the job market. Together with the cyclical weakening of a capitalist economy, the decline in real wages since the 1970s, and the growth of world market pressures, this weakness is undermining Swedish women’s gains.

Nearly 40 percent of women in the Swedish work-force work part-time. It is interesting to note, though, that short part-time (1–19 hours/week) has gone down and long part-time (20–34 hours/week) has gone up in line with the rising figures for women in the work-force in the 1970s and 1980s.

This may be caused by two different underlying trends. First, women who want to be economically independent must strive to get more income. Second, while it took 32 hours/week of waged work in 1957 to support a normal family, it takes 70–74 hours/week of waged work today. This means that in a two-parent family both parents must work, and that a one-parent family (usually female-headed) requires assistance from the state.

As a result of the large proportion of part-time work and lower wages for women, Swedish women on average still earn only 69 percent of the male income. Mothers have — in principle — themselves arranged and paid the costs of their six-hour working day.

Another negative side of the Swedish model is that Sweden has the most heavily sex-segregated work market in Europe. 84 percent of the female work-force is in health, education, caretaking and other services. For EU women the comparison is 75 percent. Only 14 percent of the female work-force in Sweden works in industry, compared with 19 percent for EU countries. And only 2 percent are active in agriculture, compared to 6 percent for EU women.

The difference may be caused simply by the higher rate of women in the work-force in Sweden, as women in the 1970s and 1980s have gone more into public and private services than before. But guest researchers in Sweden have commented on the fact that few people in politics or in union responsibilities seem to note the seriousness of this heavy segregation for the future.

The sex-segregated work market has meant that the national agreement about equal wages from 1962 has been ineffective. Slogans like “same jobs, equal pay” have not been useful since men and women don’t have the same kind of jobs, and are seldom even in the same workplaces. The deep division between male and female job markets has even made it difficult for the unions to raise the issue of “equal pay for jobs of comparable worth”.

In the last few years the wage gap between women and men has grown, with the biggest growth in inequality in the white-collar service sector and among academics and professionals.

In 1991 women in industry earned 90 percent of men’s wages. For women white-collar workers in the private sector the ratio was 75 percent. And for women employed by the
state or municipalities wages were 85-87 percent of men’s. In some academic unions women earn only 67 percent of men’s wages.

This development has led to discussions among union officials about creating broad coalitions between women in different unions (blue-collar, white-collar and academic) to fight for better wages for women.

Maids Again?

But while unionists and feminists talk about remedies, the current balance of political forces and economic and ideological climate threaten worse setbacks ahead. All important political forces in Sweden are engaged in tearing apart the existing social fabric, confronting traditional values within the workers’ movement, and undermining popular thinking about justice, welfare and solidarity (which have been very strong in Sweden).

This encourages the most reactionary forces. They have had a burst of activism in the past year or two in an effort to change Sweden’s abortion law (the existing law, adopted in 1975, gives women full and free choice over their bodies until the 18th week of pregnancy). Last April 8-10,000 anti-abortionists marched in Stockholm demanding restrictions. In the last session of parliament ten different restrictive laws were proposed: narrower time limits, compulsory counseling requirements, financial support for anti-abortion “agencies”, guarantees for fetuses’ “right” to burial, etc.

Most of these proposals were defeated. One was adopted, however: for a commission — consisting of one man! — to develop a so-called “conscience clause” for the educational system. The result is supposed to be presented this spring. Christian fundamentalists say openly that this is only a first step.

The same right-wing forces are trying hard to gain ground for backward “family politics”, such as a proposal to privatize women’s work with a sort of housewives’ wage. A neo-liberal variant of this thinking, which bourgeois economists of both sexes are now promoting, is a proposal to give substantial tax reductions to high-income households and low-income people so that low-income women can begin working again as maids in high-income households.

This type of proposal, fuelled by general devotion to the idea of reducing taxes and unemployment at the same time, is taken seriously in the establishment and in government circles. Of course it runs completely contrary to past advances in family policy. It would free high-income households from reliance on public family benefits, while making family life more difficult for low-income households.

And when it comes to one of the recent proposals for political “reform” – the pension reform – women’s life-styles and social needs are flagrantly neglected.

The existing pension system – the ATP system – has not been very beneficial for women. In 1990 women got 60 percent of the pensions men got, although 88 percent of all pensioners who depended completely on the guaranteed pension were women. But 84 percent of the women had at least worked themselves through the system and were entitled to some kind of pension.

Now comes the proposal for a pension reform, a major political agreement between the bourgeois parties and social democracy and the first concrete effort to “change the system” of social security. The gist of the proposal is to require 40 years of full-time work for a pension, instead of the existing requirement of 30 years in the job market. Four years of child care would be counted in for each child (maximum 12 years), but nothing for education – even though (according to economist Agneta Stark) “a special peculiarity women have is precisely to combine long education with low wages”.

This principle hits women, as lower-paid, highly-educated, and frequently part-time
workers, extremely hard. Even in the blue-collar sector, in the trade-union federation, 50-60 percent of women work part-time from ages 30 to 65. There are very few jobs for women that do not require some type of graduate schooling. The pension proposal thus seriously undermines existing rights to a six-hour day, parental leave and education.

The EU: Solution or Threat?
One common answer to the crisis is, “We must join the EU; we cannot solve all these problems alone.” But many more women than men in Sweden are either hesitant about or completely against Swedish entry into the European Union. Does this reflect the fact that women are really threatened by Swedish membership?

The answer is not simple. As many EU spokespeople point out, the EU also has plans for gender equality. Women have sometimes won cases in the European Court of Human Rights. But Swedish women still have reasons to be hesitant.

First of all, there are some basic provisions that differ for women in the Nordic countries as compared to continental Europe. The Nordic countries have a so-called “universal welfare policy”. All people who live in the country have the right to basic social insurance: sickness benefits, unemployment benefits, parental leave, etc. In most EU countries, social insurance is linked to having a job, sometimes a full-time job. Women who are not in this position can be married to a man with a job and thereby be insured. Single women who don’t work, or work part-time or “under the table”, are in a more vulnerable position.

Another difference between the Nordic countries and many EU countries is the legal view of the individual. In Sweden all adults are viewed legally as separate individuals, including married women. For example, there is split taxation between man and wife, which underscores the idea that women should be economically independent. This has removed tax barriers for women who want to enter the job market or extend their working time. In some EU countries it is still the “family head”, usually a man, who is the legal subject for many tax and social purposes. In this area women in the Nordic countries have an historic achievement to defend.

Another reason for hesitation is what the White Book, the Maastricht Treaty and other EU agreements say about tax ceilings, budget deficit limits, etc. Such frameworks would make it more difficult to sustain a large, developed and costly public care system like the one Sweden has had for the last few decades. On the other hand, the same neo-liberal views on taxes, state expenditures, inflation, etc. that rule within the EU also predominate in all the major Swedish parties, and are already hurting women in Sweden – even without our being EU members.

End of an Era?
The traditional political forces in Sweden have difficulties in finding a new perspective in a situation in which mass unemployment has come to stay, industrial restructuring takes away even more jobs, and the public sector can no longer function as a buffer. Their solutions are: more motorways, more big bridges, more high-tech weapons, lower taxes for private industry – and less money for the municipalities, child care, schools, hospitals and social security.

Because of traditional Swedish fundamentalism about work, there is no discussion about reducing the work week as a solution for unemployment. Not even women inside social democracy or the unions make this a central demand any longer. All political measures begin from the notion that 40 hours a week is a good working norm for everyone.

Is it a foregone conclusion that the Swedish welfare system has to go? And why do women seem to be the main victims in all major areas?

The “Swedish model” was built on a balance of forces between the bourgeoisie and the
workers' movement. This "equilibrium" worked up to the mid-1970s. By then all the specificities of the Swedish state were fully developed, including the enormous degree of centralization of both capital and state and a social system in which security was based on a well-functioning, tax-financed, public service sector. Swedish women became very dependent on this whole creation, for work and for general well-being.

Ironically, one can argue that Swedish women have exchanged their dependence on men for dependence on the state. Of course it is better not to be economically and socially dependent on another person. But we must also ask how great the difference is if the state is male-dominated and cares little about women's social or political needs.

The main "architects" behind the Swedish "model", social democracy and the workers' movement, have always been male-dominated. Swedish women are poorly represented in political circles. When the economic and political conjuncture finally shifted in the late 1980s, and the bourgeoisie took over the government, the workers' movement consequently was very slow in defending women's rights.

"Time to Change the Recipe"

In this debate women are always compared to men. With men being the norm, the conclusion is that women should correct their attitudes, work patterns, life-styles etc. Women must work full-time, "develop their competence", and so on. Feminist researchers, on the other hand, pose the question if the basic principle of having men as the norm is correct. For centuries women have adjusted to a male-dominated society. Isn't time finally that men began changing their ways of working and living?

Women are the ones who feel most clearly that there is a real systematic shift taking place. The welfare part of the "Swedish model" was not only beneficial but crucial for women. Women want to resist, and are trying to find ways to do so.

Behind recent debates about creating a Women's Party for parliament lies the knowledge that no established political force will defend women's rights in a serious way. Women are therefore demanding political representation. Women are demanding power, both inside their own organizations and in society as a whole.

The women's movement is swimming against the tide. Feminists are putting forward new or forgotten political priorities: reducing the work-week, investing in public care, building the economy around environmentally-sound and long-lasting forms of solidarity.

As one of the national spokeswomen for the possible Women's Party said, "We don't only want half the pie, we want to change the recipe - that's what they're so afraid of."
Turkey:
Women in Export Industry

By G. Zeynep

The year 1980 was a turning point in Turkey's international relations and economic policies. In that year the country turned away from "import substitution" to export-oriented policies. It began a new period in the country's attempts to integrate into world capitalism and catch up with the process of "globalization".

After years of policies designed to protect domestic industries, one of the necessary conditions for achieving competitiveness was a substantial decline in real wages and taming of labour organizations. The 1980 military coup was meant to forestall any possible opposition to the new socio-economic policies. Political and economic repression and authoritarian restructuring brought many changes to women's lives.

Women entered the labour force of the export-oriented sectors in the cities in great numbers in the 1980s, causing a reduction in real wages. It is important to note, however, that even after this increase in women's labour force participation, according to 1990 statistics, only 17 percent of the economi-cally active population in urban areas are women.1 Furthermore, only 14 percent of the industrial work-force is composed of women. Of course these statistics ignore women working in the informal sector or doing home work for export firms, who should also be counted in the growing number of women working for wages.

The new women workers went mainly into the textile, garment and pottery industries, the sectors where Turkish exports can compete with world prices. Turkey's competitiveness was maintained in the mid-1980s by keeping wages even lower than in other countries producing similar goods.

In 1985 daily wages for skilled workers in the textile industry (in U.S. dollars) were $0.76 in India, $1.72 in Turkey, $2.32 in Brazil and $2.46 in South Korea. Unskilled workers' wages were $0.59 in India, $0.84 in Turkey, $0.95 in South Korea, $1.12 in Brazil and $1.50 in Malaysia. This means that the Turkish textile industry, which accounted for about 25 percent of Turkish exports in the 1980s, achieved integration into the world market by relying on unskilled women workers whose wages were well under world levels.

From Rural Poverty to Urban Insecurity

The shift to export-oriented policies also meant a shift of subsidies away from the agricultural sector, and thus a deterioration in the living standards of the rural population and high levels of migration to the cities. Women migrated to cities in order to get informal sector jobs with which they could support their families. At the same time, rising inflation and falling real wages brought down the living standards of urban women.

2. Review of Turkish Employers' Trade Union, No. 94.
households. They pushed growing numbers of urban women into the paid work force in the 1980s.

Because of women's low educational levels, their lack of experience, their exclusion from training programmes, and discrimination against them by both employers and trade unions, they usually found jobs in the informal sector rather than the formal sector. As a result the numbers of women working as domestic servants or unregistered cleaning workers without social benefits increased. So did the numbers of women doing home work for export firms, especially in the garment, textile and pottery industries.

Increasing numbers of women doing home work in export sectors is one important result of capitalist integration. In such sectors, where no fixed production space is necessary and work can easily be broken apart into separate tasks, employers have increased their profits by using an unorganized work force and avoiding social security payments. Using unregistered labour for home work also allows employers to escape from some portion of taxes.

Women's involvement in home work for export industry imprisons them all the more in their homes. Home work prevents any kind of union organizing among these women, causing a sharp decline in real wages not only for them but for the whole sector. Moreover, this type of work in no way lightens women's burden of household responsibilities. On the contrary, the work they do for the market is seen as more housework, more invisible production for the family. Women's oppression inside the home is increased, not decreased, by this kind of wage labour.

Women working in either the informal sector or the formal sector meet export industry's needs for flexible, cheap labour to achieve international competitiveness. These are the low-wage, high-risk sectors where there is no social security. As a result of discrimination in general, women earn 10 percent less than men. In 1991 the average daily wage of a male worker covered by social security was 56,310 Turkish pounds (ca. $2.55 US) whereas the equivalent figure for female workers was 50,924 Turkish pounds (ca. $2.30 US). Only 21.1 percent of registered female workers earned wages equal to or greater than the average male wage; thus almost 80 percent of women earned less than the male average. In most cases the jobs are the same: women earn less simply because they are women. Capital rationalizes lower wages for women through sexist prejudice, pure and simple.\(^3\)

Another way of achieving a flexible, cheap labour force is by employing part-time workers. Most of industry's demands for part-time, low-paid labour are supplied by women. Women not only face more difficulties than men in finding jobs, but also usually see their work as a support to family income and prefer to combine housework with their paid work. Only half of women workers in Turkey work 40 hours a week (the standard Turkish work-week). Three times as many female workers as male workers have jobs of less than 40 hours a week.\(^4\) Since part-time workers have no social rights such as maternity leave, promotion is ruled out. These part-time workers both supply capitalism with the necessary supply of cheap, flexible workers and continue their work as women in the rest of the day, cheaply reproducing the labour force that capitalism needs.

Capital's control over women's reproductive functions has increased as women have moved into export industry jobs. In the formal sector, women workers face compulsory birth control and monthly pregnancy checks. They usually have to accept a condition in their contracts that they will lose their jobs if they become pregnant.

3. Report by DISK, Confederation of Revolutionary Workers' Trade Unions, 11 June 1993, Turkey.
4. Ibid.
Women and Privatization

Another aspect of Turkey's integration into the world market is the privatization of public enterprises, in keeping with the IMF's and World Bank's structural adjustment plans. Privatization applications have led to many workers' losing their jobs. This has not affected women directly in public enterprises in cement, animal feed, telecommunications, auto, iron and steel, since workers in these firms are predominantly male. But as part of the privatization of food processing, insurance, banking, chemicals, airlines and beverage industries, women were often the first to lose their jobs.

Besides this direct result, women have been indirectly affected by privatization as well. With the increasing unemployment brought about by privatization, the prospects for affirmative action policies have worsened. Privatization has also brought attacks on trade-union organizations in its wake, making it harder to increase women's participation in unions and thus in public life more generally.

The neo-liberal ideological basis for privatization also creates a climate in which the whole idea of public social services is delegitimized, so that the prospect of re-defining the services provided privately by women as services to be provided by society at large becomes increasing remote. In an underdeveloped country like Turkey, where the welfare state has always been weak, demands for women's liberation through lightening women's service-providing burden have always involved an uphill struggle. Now the struggle has become that much harder.

Turkish capital is trying to find a place for itself in a world economy that is itself in a crisis of deindustrialization, weak demand and speculation. Under these circumstances it does not hesitate to demand sacrifices from Turkish workers: lower wages, higher taxes, and all the other pressures facing working people in the Third World. Women particularly are bearing the consequences, both as housewives and as workers, having to save more and work more both inside and outside the home. Ten years of Turkish efforts to integrate into world capitalism have victimized women above all, the weakest sector of society, reinforcing their double exploitation and undermining their resistance.
South Africa: Race, Class and Gender under and after Apartheid

By Rita Edwards

The position of women in South African society must be seen in the context of the two major phenomena of class and race. All social relations are structured or determined by these phenomena. Racism in the service of a specific economic system existed in South Africa long before it was systematized and expanded through the introduction of apartheid. Racism remains central to the society and economy even as the formal structures of apartheid are dismantled. Feminism, as it has begun to take root in South Africa, is inevitably and profoundly shaped by these realities.

Although all South African women experience male domination, it is experienced by black women and working-class women very differently from white and upper-class women. The iron chains of working-class and third-world women are very different from the golden ones of upper-class and first-world women. Patriarchy has qualitatively different meanings in different class and ethnic situations.

In this context it is not possible to speak of a common sisterhood. To organize women simply on the basis of their common sexual oppression is to ignore these differences and will not meet with great success.

This paper explores the theme of race, class and gender oppression. It shows how South African women have experienced their oppression, how they have organized their resistance, and how they face new challenges in a post-apartheid society.

How Race and Class Structure Gender Relations

Many racist laws existed in South Africa before 1948, when the ruling National Party introduced apartheid. Racial oppression can be seen in the following two examples. When the Union of South Africa was established in 1910, a parliament was established for which only white males had the franchise. Besides the fact that women of all races were denied the right to vote - the issue that would occupy the attention of the suffragist movement worldwide - black men were excluded from the franchise. The Land Acts, which prevented African people from owning land outside the native reserves and which confined 87 percent of the people to 13 percent of the land, were also introduced in 1913, long before apartheid came into existence.

From these examples it should be clear that apartheid as a social system simply extended and institutionalized an ideology that used race as the crucial determinant in arranging people’s lives. Apartheid as a system evolved out of the structures of segregation established through the period of colonial settlement, conquest and rule.

Apartheid formally established that race would determine where one would live, whom one could marry, what school one

could attend, the wages one received, and of course who had political rights and who did not. Whites belonged to a minority of privileged people in whom economic and political control was vested. These privileges afforded to whites through the apartheid system played a major role in winning the allegiance of the white population, including the white working class, to the state.

Racism was used as a tool of capitalism in South Africa, in particular in providing capital with a source of very cheap black labour. Through “influx control” legislation (pass laws, Group Areas Act, Labour Bureaus), the state was directly responsible for regulating the supply of labour, in allocating labour between different sectors of the economy and in determining workers’ access to housing and services.

The discovery of minerals in South Africa, which spawned a massive labour shortage for the mines and other burgeoning industries in the country, forced large-scale state intervention to create cheap black labour. This was done primarily by limiting access to land and by controlling access to urban areas. The infamous migrant labour system was the result.

As the South African economy became more sophisticated, the subtleties of class stratification within black and white groups became more pronounced. Initially the broad divide between black and white had in most respects corresponded to class. Racial consciousness had the effect of obscuring class divisions within black and white groups respectively. Today it is obvious that not all white people belong to the middle classes, nor do all black people belong to the working class. However, racial oppression and dogmas of white supremacy have tended to obscure these differences and have led to ideologies that appeal to colour solidarity, e.g. white supremacy and black consciousness, which are still dominant today in spite of the dismantling of apartheid.

As a result the South African working class is divided along lines of colour. The white working class essentially constitutes a labour aristocracy, which benefits in terms of their living standards from the super-exploitation of black workers. It is not surprising then that white workers are the most hostile to the political settlement that has been negotiated, because they fear losing the privileged status that apartheid gave them.

How Colour and Class Have Stratified Women Workers

The link between class and race has had a diversifying effect on women’s economic position, with far-reaching repercussions on their political outlook. Gender divisions too have been manipulated in the interests of capitalism.

In South Africa black men were drawn into the economy before black women, receiving a wage far below that of their white counterparts. In manufacturing white women were the majority of the female labour force. However, as industry expanded black women were drawn into the economy as well. White women tended to move up the scale into clerical and administrative work, leaving black women on the factory floor. Many white women left work altogether as whites’ living standards improved after the depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s. As white men moved up the ladder to skilled, supervisory and management posts, black men moved into the erstwhile “masculine” industrial sector jobs and black women into the “feminine” industrial sector jobs.

Today black women (meaning all women oppressed because of colour) constitute the mass of garment, textile, food, canning, footwear and domestic workers. By 1980 black men were mainly working as (largely unskilled) industrial workers, and black women were predominantly working as domestic servants for middle-class (mainly white but also black) women. However, through winning trade union rights and because of increased demands for skilled labour that whites could not fulfill, blacks were able to change this situation during the 1980s. Many more black workers are
employed in skilled and semi-skilled positions today.

At the same time white women were employed in the retail sector as sales assistants, in banks, in clerical positions and in professional work. In the first instance women were employed because they were being paid a lower wage than men. Today, however, women, including black women, are employed at wages equal to men's but in more poorly-paid jobs for which men are not available. In these jobs women are more likely to lose their jobs during recessionary periods and are most often employed on a part-time basis as casuals.

In South Africa today women constitute 53 percent of the population but only two fifths of the paid work-force (approximately 39.4 percent). They are less likely than men to be employed as their role is generally seen in terms of the home and the family. Women constitute two thirds of service workers, half of all clerical and sales workers and half of all professional and semi-professional workers.²

Women’s emergence into the public sphere in the economy and society encouraged the development of a women’s movement. But politically as well as economically and socially, women have been divided and manipulated along racial lines.

White Women’s Resistance: The Suffragists

One of the pioneers of the movement for women's suffrage was South African novelist Olive Schreiner. In the early twentieth century the women suffragists were the only political movement in South Africa concerned with women’s rights. They campaigned for twenty years, from 1911 to 1930. However, they were at pains to explain that enfranchisement of women would not upset relations at home – or between the races.

Suffragists were mainly white women campaigning for votes equal to their white male counterparts’. Their struggle did not include black women and their tactics were generally mild. When white women were eventually given the vote, this coincided with the abolition of the African male franchise in Cape Province, which supposedly had a more liberal tradition than the rest of the country.

The point is that although the demand for women’s enfranchisement is explicitly feminist, the suffragists’ movement in South Africa was a racist one which ignored three fourths of the women in the country.

One suffragist named Aletta Nel, when asked at the Select Committee hearing on women's suffrage if she favoured extending the vote to black women, replied, “As a woman, sir, yes, but as a South African-born person I feel that it would be wiser if we gave the vote to the European women only.”³

Black Women’s Resistance: In the National Liberation Struggle

For black women the struggle against apartheid and for political rights for all took precedence over the struggle against the laws and institutions that discriminated against them as women. These include customary laws and traditions.

One of the chief ways in which the apartheid ideologues manipulated race and gender to serve capitalism was through the migrant labour system. This system was based on the notion that African people belonged in the rural reserves and could only live in the white cities if they had jobs. It was a way of controlling the movement of black labour. To qualify to live in the cities blacks had to carry what were known as passes, certifying that they had permanent jobs. In the beginning the pass laws applied only to men, because men were drawn into industrial labour first. Women were bound by domestic responsibilities, and their role was defined within the home and the family. The

². Agenda no. 18 (1993), p. 44.
pass laws and migrant labour system thus divided black families.

However, with increasing industrialization and increasing proletarianization of the black peasantry, women began moving to the cities to find jobs. It was then that the pass laws were extended to women. Black women organized major political campaigns and demonstrations to resist the imposition of passes from as early as 1913, but particularly throughout the 1950s. This was the first major campaign that black women organized and through which they showed political initiative.

The 1950s also coincided with a period of increasing militant action in the broader struggle. Major campaigns in which black women participated were the Defiance Campaign of 1956 and the Sharpeville Anti-Pass Campaign. As a result of these campaigns and social upheavals the right-wing government passed extremely repressive legislation.

The general point about all this is that black women's entry into politics came about as a direct result of the way in which the apartheid system affected them as women.

Black women also exerted an influence in the Federation of South African Women founded in 1954. The Women's Charter drafted at its 1954 founding conference was the first comprehensive statement of the women's movement's principles. Whilst recognizing the need to struggle against gender inequality, the Charter completely identified the women's movement with the national liberation movement:

As members of the National Liberatory movements and trade unions we march forward with our men in the struggle for liberation and the defence of the working people. As women there rests upon us also the burden of removing from our society all the social differences developed in past times between men and women which have the effect of keeping our sex in a position of inferiority and subordination.

This Women's Charter recognized the extent to which the national liberation movement had mirrored the very prejudices that women had to combat in the wider society. In its conclusion the Charter asserted that an informal relationship existed between women's inferior status and the inferior status assigned to people by discriminatory laws and colour prejudices.

Post-1990: The Emerging Feminist Consciousness

The 1980s saw a general upturn in struggle in South Africa. Class struggle intensified, which led to the formation of two major trade-union federations, COSATU and NACTU. At this time all liberation organizations have explicitly included in their manifestos or principles the anti-sexist nature of the struggle.

In 1990 the National Party government under De Klerk took the initiative of unbanning political organizations such as the ANC, PAC and South African Communist Party. This opened up the period of negotiations for a new constitution as well as a reform of apartheid laws. As talks about a new constitution have progressed, the voices of women have also been heard. The National Women's Coalition, consisting of both bourgeois and working-class women, has embarked on a women's charter campaign. In the trade unions the gender commissions are becoming more active. Rural women have begun to organize themselves into a rural women's movement, and generally there is talk about challenging customary laws that discriminate against women. The question is: Do all these initiatives point to an emerging feminist movement based on the needs of the poorest women? If so, what will the relationship of this new movement be with a new government or with other political parties? And in a post-apartheid society in which race and class remain central, what kind of South Africa will the women's movement fight for?

4. Ibid., p. 15.
India: The Effect of Capitalist Development on Gender Violence: Dowry and Female Feticide

By Trupti Shah & Bina Srinivasan

With its tumultuous diversity and multifaceted culture, India has had its own history of the oppression of women. Feudal, patriarchal values have conjoined with capitalism (first brought in through colonization, now being imposed by both Indian ruling elites and Western capital represented by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank) to reinforce and continue women’s oppression in various ways. The result is that violence against women has increased.

Pre-capitalist forms of violence are sometimes presented as remnants of the past, which will be abolished with the development of capitalism, modernization or simply education. Visitors from Europe or North America put the blame on the backwardness of India’s culture. The national government says the same. But although much of the violence against women in Indian society takes its forms from the past, its content has changed. It results from the type of capitalist development that exists in this particular country. Two major, interconnected forms of violence against women in India are dowry death (or bride-burning) and female feticide. We will try to explain the strength and function of these two forms in present-day India. The purpose of this article is not to analyse every aspect of dowry. Rather, it is to explain the changes that have affected this social custom with the onset of capitalist development.

Origins of Dowry

Violence against women in India is part of the violence against oppressed people, i.e. dalits (“lower” castes), workers and indigenous peoples (adivasis). Gender violence also occurs within the communities of the oppressed: women therefore have an additional burden to bear. A complex interaction of class, caste, gender and culture impinges upon the forms of violence perpetrated on women in India.

Amongst other forms of violence against women, the practice of dowry – an important social custom – has led to the murders of large numbers of women. It is one of the more significant kinds of violence being inflicted on women today and has taken on grisly features lately. A complex set of factors has made “dowry deaths” an almost commonplace occurrence. We have to examine several processes to begin to understand how and why women have been confronted

1. Sources for this article, besides those cited in footnotes below, have included V.I. Pavlov, Historical Premises for India’s Transition to Capitalism (1973); André Béteille, Caste, Class and Power (1971); C.J. Fuller, The Camphor Flame (1992); Amiya Kumar Bagchi, The Political Economy of Underdevelopment (1982); Romilla Thapar, The History of India, vol. 1 (1966); Veena Pooncha (ed.), Understanding Violence (Bombay: Research Centre for Women’s Studies, 1992); Govind Kelkar, “Violence against Women” in Niraj Sinha (ed.), Women and Violence (New Delhi: Vikas, 1989); Vibhuti Patel, “Towards a Feminist Critique of Theories of Violence” (Jan. 1980); Neera Desai and Madhevi Krishnara, Women and Society (New Delhi: Ajanta, 1987); and Madhu Kishwar, “Dowry Calculations”, Manushino. 78 (New Delhi, 1993). We wish to acknowledge the help of Ms. Moly Jacob, without whose help this article would not have been typed and finished.
with dowry-related violence, and how dowry itself has changed over a period of time.

Dowry is the cash or goods or both given to the groom's family by the bride's family to effect marriage and subsequently on other occasions after marriage has taken place. The higher the status of the groom, the higher is the dowry demanded.

It would be difficult to ascertain when and exactly how the practice originated and what were the precise historical factors that went into making dowry mandatory in Hindu caste society, as there is very little data available and very few records to draw upon. But broadly speaking several processes took place in conjunction, giving dowry its present form.

In pre-capitalist India, dowry was connected with the hierarchical character of the caste system. It was practised mainly by upper castes and the land-owning castes. Both land and caste were the parameters of power in feudal India. "Hypergamy", i.e. marrying of the daughter to a family of higher caste, was a means of securing alliances with powerful families. Dowry was given to compensate for the difference between the status of the two families. It served to compensate for the increase in status of the bride's family, and was a recognition of the higher status of the groom's family.

Another factor that went into the practice of dowry was the concept of women's chastity and purity. Hinduism has fixed prescriptions for proper female behaviour, all of which are aimed at controlling women's fertility and sexuality. Women in pre-colonial India were considered to be the property of their fathers, husbands and sons, to be protected in childhood, wifehood and old age. Like most organized religion, Hinduism does not grant women equality, though it has changed over the years and accommodates various liberal strands within it. A woman is to be the bearer of a male child, a dutiful wife and a submissive daughter. In pre-capitalist society, it was considered obligatory for the father to give his daughter in marriage at the right age to the right family.

Even when the marriage was between families of similar status, in some of the upper and middle castes, some dowry was given. It was connected with the fact that women from the upper castes were not allowed to do productive work. Women were considered to be unwanted burdens after a certain age. Dowry was therefore the price paid to the groom's family for accepting a daughter, so that they would protect her and provide for her.

From Bride-Price to Dowry

Dowry was practised by the upper castes and some middle castes. The lower castes seldom gave dowries; instead they had a custom of bride-price or mutual gift-giving. In these castes, women's labour was used extensively on the land. Women were therefore seen to be active in "productive" activities. They were not perceived to be economic burdens. Bride-price was a recognition of the value of women's labour and a compensation to the bride's family for loss of her labour. Lower-caste Hindu society thus perceived women as significant contributors to the economy. This does not mean that it was not oppressive of women; just that dowry was not manifest in quite the same forms. The socio-economic context in which bride-price made the transition to dowry would give an indication of how the status of women changed over a period of time.

Dowry, though restricted to the upper and middle castes in pre-capitalist India, is now rapidly spreading to other castes and communities which have seldom practised dowry in the past. Contemporary dowry practices are quantitatively as well as qualitatively different from earlier patterns. While dowry was always a means to subjugate women, it is now assuming violent and cruel forms. Women are being tortured by their in-laws in order to extract more dowry, to an extent that they often force women into suicide. In many cases in-laws themselves burn women alive to get a new bride and more dowry.
Some of the significant features of dowry as it is practised today are:

a) It is spreading to all castes, classes and religious communities. Although it was originally a Hindu custom, now some Muslim and Christian groups also practice dowry.

b) The amount of dowry being exchanged is increasing. Many marriages are founded on the sole consideration of dowry.

c) Along with caste and property, higher education, jobs in the public sector or administrative services, professional status (e.g. as doctors, lawyers or engineers), and citizenship of a Western country are some of the factors that contribute to the dowry being demanded.

d) The violence related to dowry is assuming brutal forms. It exists now in almost all states of India. In pre-colonial India dowry, while a form of women’s subordination, was not accompanied by such brutal violence on such a large scale.

The issue here is that modernization and capitalist development do not seem to have diluted the practice of dowry. One of the reasons for this is that dowry as it is practised in contemporary India is a product of an interaction between past forms of subjugation of women and the socio-economic changes that have resulted from the processes of colonization and colonial capitalist development.

Colonization and Women’s Economic Marginalization

In pre-colonial India, the caste system was essentially an economic and social division of the various components of Hindu society. Each caste and sub-caste had a specific position in the caste hierarchy, and was accompanied by a corresponding occupation. The social rank accruing to each caste division was also dependent on economic power, which was decided by the success each group had historically in manipulating and coercing the different elements of the social matrix. The caste system had strict regulations laid down for its adherents, which had to be followed in their entirety if caste purity and status were to be retained. Marriage, pollution rules, social codes and norms varied within and among caste groups.

Colonization introduced the capitalist mode of production in India, in accordance with the needs of British imperialism. This brought about several contradictory and complex changes in the economy and society. The caste system is no longer the predominant form of social division of labour, reducing the correspondence between caste and occupation. Capitalism has blurred caste distinctions, as it brought in a different kind of education system and industries, providing new avenues for social and economic mobility for different caste groups.

Colonization affected feudal relations and Hindu caste society in a way that aggravated the situation of women. For example, the colonial system of allotting land entitlements in the name of the head of the household, i.e. the man, paved the way for the disinheritance of women, where customary laws often allowed women to hold property. The pre-capitalist economy in India was largely land-, household- and community-based. Women played significant roles in all three of these spheres. Home-based production made women’s work an important component of the pre-capitalist economy.

With the introduction of capitalism, economic control shifted away from the household and “production” centres were relocated outside the household. Mechanization was selectively introduced, displacing women from traditional areas of work and making their labour redundant. Privatization of family land-holdings and of communally-owned land such as pastures and forests had an overall negative effect on women’s productive capacities. Women’s control over natural resources declined.

Cottage industry and household industry were ruined by British policy. For example,
spinning and weaving were among the major occupations for women in pre-colonial India. There were regional specializations of women's crafts, e.g. silk manufacturing in Assam, blanket-making in the North, chikan in Uttar Pradesh, quilting in Bengal, tie-dye in Rajasthan, and rug-making in Sindh and Baluchistan. With colonization, most women were eliminated from their traditional areas of production, while new economic opportunities were almost completely closed to them.

Rice dehusking is another such example. Rice pounding was one of the major women's occupations in some of India's rice-producing regions. In 1901, the number of women engaged in rice pounding was 2.5 million. By 1931, with the introduction of rice meal, the number of women engaged in this occupation fell to 131,000.

Independence and Capitalist Development

Post-independence saw a continuation of these processes of capitalist development, with a devastating effect on women. “Socialism” was the byword of a post-colonial era whose major political figures were influenced by the vision of a Fabian utopia, but guided by the interests of more well-to-do peasants and major industrial companies. The ruling elite continued to consist of landlords, capitalists, upper-caste Hindus and bureaucrats. While an attempt was made to imitate Soviet-style planning, the state subsidized the private sector with infrastructure and financial support so that private industry could defend itself against Western capital and get a firm foothold in heavy industry.

While there was a current of liberal reform that wanted the state to play the role of benefactor and “uplift” the masses, there was little success in the alleviation of poverty or provision of health care or jobs. Indian society continued to be guided by pre-independence class relations, determined also in large part by caste.

The needs of capital led to contradictions between protectionism and liberalization, with a long-term shift from the first to the second. The process of economic liberalization began as early as 1960, though the pace was slow and occurred in fits and starts according to the exigencies of capital. On the other hand, the Indian state was obliged to keep up its rhetorical, socialist façade, partly because of popular movements, partly because of the political dynamics of India's position in South Asia and the patronage of the former Soviet Union. In 1969 banks were nationalized, while in the 1980s economic liberalization received a big boost. Since 1990, the country has witnessed a near-complete dismantling of government controls. National and Western capital is poised for a takeover, with the strength of the Indian state behind it.

Throughout the years of post-independence “development”, large numbers of women have found themselves in low-paying, piece-rate, informal work that does not come under the purview of labour laws and is not granted any kind of state protection. Even while women joined the labour force in increasing numbers, they were pushed out onto the periphery of the labour market. Women's work-load has increased; wages have not.

In recent years, the introduction of new technology in agriculture has rendered many women unemployed. Rationalization and modernization of textile mills has eliminated women from jobs that they had traditionally held in large numbers. In the face of growing unemployment and a worsening economic situation, the percentage of women engaged in economically gainful activities has declined. The only positive experience has been for middle-class women, who have gotten more education and entered the service sector in large numbers.

Sanskritization

Capitalism has also brought other changes to Hindu society in particular, by reducing somewhat the correspondence between caste and occupation. While caste still
determines social life, kinship relations and marriage alliances, there has been a certain amount of secularization at least in urban areas, although the process is by no means complete or invariant. On the other hand, a process of “Sanskritization” has set in.

Sanskritization implies social and cultural hegemony of the upper castes. It is an attempt to erode the lines between upper and lower castes at the cost of lower-caste identity; it seeks to absorb all lower-caste customs, life-styles and cultural legacies into the “mainstream” of upper-caste Hinduism. It is also an imitation of upper-caste norms of behaviour and customs by lower-caste people seeking to achieve upward mobility on the ladder of caste structure. (It is much the same as the process whereby the hegemony of white “civilization” is imposed on or accepted by black and indigenous peoples.)

The interaction of pre-existing customs of dowry amongst upper-caste Hindus, the process of Sanskritization, and the economic processes set into motion by capitalism brought about an entirely changed situation for women. This changed situation has led to the perception that women are economically unproductive, which is the basic premise behind the contemporary practice of dowry. Consumerism and commercialization of each and every aspect of life are two additional factors. It is the coincidence of all these factors that explains the new phenomenon of dowry death or bride-burning.

Thus dowry death is not a continuing form of violence from the past, though its form is feudal. Its content is very much rooted in the new economic reality.

Women Organize against Dowry

The women’s movement in India was galvanized around the issue of dowry in the late 1970s. A sudden increase in “accidental” deaths of women came to the notice of some women’s groups in urban areas. Many of these deaths were suicides; others were instances when women had been burnt to death. Investigations by women’s groups revealed the chilling and sordid reality behind these deaths.

A glance at some statistics reveals the extent of women’s vulnerability to “dowry death” in India. In Delhi, two women die of burns every day. In a Bombay municipal hospital, there were 157 burn cases in six months (1987-88). In Bangalore, suicide and dowry deaths doubled in 1984. Karnataka reported nine cases of dowry deaths in 1982, 31 in 1983 and 48 in 1984. Andhra Pradesh reported 14 deaths in 1983, 27 in 1984 and 38 in 1985. Uttar Pradesh reported 182 deaths in 1984 and 323 in 1985. Madhya Pradesh reported 42 cases in just five months from June to October 1985. In Maharashtra, there were 129 cases of dowry death in 1984, which doubled in 1985. According to the official crime statistics registered with police stations, six women are burned alive every day in the state of Gujarat alone, which has the highest rate of dowry death. There are probably just as many unreported deaths.

Even for those unwilling to go by statistics, there can be no denying that dowry cannot be seen as a harmless social ritual that is meant to regulate and distribute economic resources. Dowry deaths are a chilling indication of the expendability of women’s lives in a patriarchal set-up that is guided by the interests of capitalist modernization. This is the reality of women’s lives, which are continuously exposed to the dangers that these two forces unleash as they spin into each other.

Women’s groups rose up against this social menace in the 1970s. The anti-dowry campaign entailed fighting cases in court; organizing protest demonstrations and social boycotts against dowry-giving and -receiving families; fighting against the police; and forcing the media to recognize dowry.
deaths for the murders they were. Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, Pune and Nagpur saw women of all ages come into the streets, picket outside residences distributing pamphlets, send memoranda to state agencies, argue at police stations, and engage in a debate over the effectiveness of the law.

A wave of awareness was generated by the anti-dowry campaign, which forced the state to respond and has at least discredited this custom at a social level. There is much more that needs to be done, for women are still being murdered in the name of dowry, but a beginning has been made.

Debates in the Movement

In the course of the anti-dowry campaign, different strands of opinion surfaced inside and outside the women's movement about what dowry actually is and what purpose it serves. An overview of these opinions follows:

a. Dowry basically represents social values intrinsic to Hindu families and the Hindu social set-up that have become distorted due to modernization. Consumerism and material greed have led to commodification of women, and linked social relations to the acquisition of wealth. The need of the moment is to raise people's consciousness about this commercialization. Once this is done, dowry will be eliminated.

b. The transition from bride-price to dowry is due to the deteriorating role of female labour in the economic sphere and the reduction of women’s contribution to the family. Women’s cost of maintenance is therefore much higher than their economic input. Dowry came into being to balance this unequal situation.

c. Dowry is a rotating sum of money that comes in at the son’s wedding and is used for the daughter’s marriage. Daughters are now economic liabilities; once they are gainfully employed, dowry will disappear.

d. Dowry is a manifestation of a backward, semi-feudal custom, which takes on a consumerist, capitalist framework. With changes in economic and production relations, it will be eliminated.

e. Dowry is a tribute from bride-giving families to bride-receiving families. It is a “clear manifestation of a structurally hypergamous, non-reciprocal, asymmetrical and extractive relationship between i) bride-giving and -receiving families and ii) men and women.”

f. Dowry is a transfer of wealth between families, with women as the medium through which it is effected. It is an acknowledgment of the groom’s status, which is deemed to be superior as he takes upon himself the burden of an unwanted daughter. Laws will not help eliminate dowry; it will continue to be exchanged under cover. The answer is to demand inheritance rights for women.

Female Feticide

The perception that women are burdens, and the overall patriarchal bias in Hindu caste society, has led to an increasing preference for male children. A woman’s place is considered to be with her husband, and marriage is supposed to mean that all connections with the daughter have been severed. This leaves the male children to look after parents in their old age and carry forward the family line. Hindu scriptures also forbid daughters from burning the dead; the cremation pyre is supposed to be lit by the eldest son.

For these reasons, the custom of female infanticide was prevalent in some castes of pre-colonial India: the restricted number of caste groups that practised dowry. In present society, the spread of the dowry system has combined with advances in medical technology and capitalist modernization to give rise to yet another heinous crime – female feticide.

Amniocentesis and chorion biopsy, both medical tests that were devised basically to

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detect genetic abnormalities in the fetus, are
now being used in India primarily to detect
the sex of the fetus. The detection of a female
fetus usually leads to abortion. Modern tech-
nology is therefore being used to further
intensify discrimination against women.

Female feticide has today reached alarming
proportions and threatens to continue
unabated. In Gujarat alone, according to
conservative estimates, 100,000 female
fetuses are aborted every year. Amniocente-
sis is offered by most abortion clinics and
gynecologists, not only in big cities but also
in small towns.

When contacted by activists, doctors openly
acknowledge that amniocentesis has bad
side effects on women’s health. Nonethe-
less, in complete disregard of medical
ethics, doctors have been openly conducting
sex-selection tests and performing abor-
tions of female fetuses. When questioned
by activists, they have bluntly argued, “We
are providing a service that is demanded by
the society.” Doctors, considered as the
most educated and the “cream” of Indian
society, consider this a way to get easy mon-
ey.

Common people, both men and women,
feel that instead of raising a girl and paying
dowry for her marriage later, it is better to
spend money on a sex-determination test
today. But the test is also widely used by
educated, middle-class people in order to
have a “balanced” family. The educated
middle class is committed to the norm of
small families, but do not want small fami-
lies with only daughters. Sex-determination
tests are thus becoming popular among all
caste, class and religious groups in India.

In places where the sex ratio is extremely neg-
ative, for example in areas of Rajasthan and
Bihar, forced polyandry is a growing form of
women’s oppression. Women are forced to
have sexual relations with all male members
of the family. With further declines in the sex
ratio, violence against women – harassment,
rape, etc. – will increase.

To add insult to injury, female feticide is often
cited as a measure of population control. The
Indian government is today facing tremen-
dous pressure to implement population con-
trol measures from the IMF and Western
countries on which India is dependent for
aid. Arguments in favour of tolerating female
feticide gain a wider currency since abortion
of female fetuses decreases population
growth in two ways: the number of children is
less, and the number of future mothers is
less.

The Indian government thus side-steps the
main issue of redistribution of resources, and
becomes more concerned about restricting
population growth than about addressing
basic issues such as unemployment, health
care and land reform. Western governments
have their own reasons for turning a blind eye
to the whole issue of consumption patterns
that deepen the divide between rich and poor
nations.

To rectify these imbalances, to change the
reality of women’s lives for the better, to
ensure that women are able to live with digni-
ty and with the basic essentials of life, our
struggles cannot remain localized. The forces
with which we are confronted are global. The
“new world order” demands new responses
and more creative political action that can
enfold women in all corners of the globe.

WOMEN’S LIVES IN THE NEW GLOBAL ECONOMY • PENNY DUGGAN & HEATHER DASHER, EDITORS
Malaysia: Tradition, Change and Everyday Resistance

By Carol McAllister

When introducing students at the University of Pittsburgh to the situation of women in Malaysia, I often show them a slide that shows a woman (whom I will call Asmah) standing in a rice field, holding a handmade hoe which she is using to repair the dikes before planting the rice crop that will supply much of her family's staple food for the coming year. In the corner of the slide my students can see the power lines that supply Asmah's village with electricity as well as draw her and other subsistence farmers more fully into the cash economy. Standing beside Asmah is her young son, wearing only a tee-shirt since he is being gently introduced to toilet-training. A close-up shot reveals that his shirt features a picture of Donnie and Marie Osmond, popular cultural figures in the Malay community during the late 1970s.

The social and cultural complexity of Malaysian women's lives— for example, the co-existence of a subsistence and a cash economy and of indigenous and Western cultural images—is only hinted at in this photograph. For example, as a Negeri Sembilan woman, Asmah effectively controls both the field in which she is standing and the crop her labour produces, while the formal ownership of such resources is collectively shared with other women in her kin group. This follows from the traditional matrilineal practices of this area of Malaysia. Meanwhile, Asmah's oldest daughter Noriah was temporarily unemployed after a series of low-wage jobs, including washing hair at a beauty shop and pumping gas at a nearby service station.

There are many dangers in attempting to discuss "the situation" of women in Malaysia in a short article. There is much diversity in women's situations—and viewpoints and perspectives—depending on the ethnic or socio-cultural group to which they belong. The Malays (55 percent of the population), who are considered the indigenous population of Malaysia, were an almost completely rural people until the most recent generation. Although they are now being drawn in large numbers into industrial wage-work, they are still concentrated in rural villages in the rice-growing regions of the Peninsula. In contrast, the Chinese population is overwhelming urban, while Indians are heavily represented both among urban shopkeepers and civil servants and among the poorest of the rural labourers. Even among indigenous Malays, there are variations in cultural patterns and in the type of pre-colonial economy that characterized different regions.

Today we are also seeing growing class differences among women in each of the three major ethnic groups. Capitalist development is causing a fundamental transformation in Malay women's lives as they are drawn more fully into the international wage-and-market economy. At the same time, there is an ongoing involvement of women in traditional economic and social practices. Traditional forms and values are kept alive, and in fact often revitalized and elaborated, by Malay women themselves because they provide a means for coping with, protesting against, and sometimes even resisting the more
exploitative aspects of dependent development. At the same time, such indigenous traditions can be undermined and distorted by their encounter with capitalism, and can be manipulated by employers for their own ends.

These complex and contradictory dynamics both shape and reflect the choices of Malay women in the current period of rapid socio-economic change. This discussion will focus on some working-class and peasant Malay women's experiences during the last 20-25 years, as their society has undergone a process of incorporation into the world capitalist economy.¹

Capitalist Development and Malay Women

The Malaysian state is following a model of capitalist development based on export-processing industrialization, with an aspiration of becoming one of the Newly Industrialized Countries as represented currently by the Four Tigers of Asia (Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan). After a serious economic crisis in the mid-1980s, resulting in tens of thousands of workers' losing their jobs, the economy has shown a steady and rapid growth, including an increasing conversion from the production of primary resources (especially natural rubber, palm oil, and tropical timber) to the manufacture of industrial components and products. Unlike its Latin American and African counterparts, Malaysia is relatively unburdened by an excessive foreign debt and the kinds of IMF austerity measures imposed elsewhere.

While many families in Malaysia experience economic hardship and insecurity, there is a noticeable absence of the kind of desperate poverty that increasingly characterizes most Third World countries. But the model of industrialization being pursued by this aspiring NIC is based on super-exploitation and control of the work-force as well as ignoring of serious environmental, health, and safety issues. All of this sets the stage for the changing experiences of Malay women.

During 1978-79 when I carried out field research in the Kuala Pilah area of Negeri Sembilan, young women for the first time in their community's history were being drawn in significant numbers into wage labour. Many of these women, along with their female counterparts from other regions of Malaysia, formed the backbone of the work-force in the Japanese and U.S.-owned electronics plants that had mushroomed since the early 1970s as part of the new strategy of export-processing or off-shore sourcing by international capital. Other young women, also working in Free Trade Zones, were employed by the longer-standing but expanding textile industry. This pattern continues today: "80% of the 85,000 jobs that have been created in electronics alone are held by women. And 70% of these women workers are Malay."²

Some of these new jobs are located in the rural areas. Others require Malay women to relocate, at least on a temporary basis, from their rural villages to urban settings or industrial zones. The young, unmarried female factory worker was the typical pattern in the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. There are indications, however, that women are now staying longer in these jobs through the experience of marriage and child-bearing. This is a significant new development that will affect female roles, family patterns, and the structure of both rural and urban

¹ The analysis presented here is based in part on the author's own anthropological field research in several Malay villages in the late 1970s in the traditionally matrilineal area of Negeri Sembilan (see McAllister, Carol, Matrility, Islam, and Capitalism: Combined and Uneven Development in the Lives of Negeri Sembilan Women, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh (1987), and "Uneven and Combined Development: Dynamics of Change and Women's Everyday Forms of Resistance in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia", Review of Radical Political Economics, Vol. 23, nos. 1 & 2(1991)), updated and supplemented by reports published by other researchers during the 1980s and early 1990s.

Malay society. For example, "For older workers with children, living away from their extended families means devising new arrangements for raising their children since neither the government nor the factories offer child care."\(^3\)

The main attraction for multinational companies to locate their plants in Malaysia is the availability of a cheap, though fairly well-educated, labour force. A 1989 report, for example, indicated that female production workers in electronics factories were paid around US $4.20 a day. In 1992, wages in the two most industrialized states of Selangor and Penang averaged only $2.40–4.00 a day.\(^4\) Yet many of the young women who work in electronics or other kinds of factories are high school graduates.

There are also the advantages to multinationals of a political climate that prevents labour militancy, including stringent control over union organizing and activity, and special benefits for investing in a Free-Trade Zone, such as tax holidays and exemptions from import-export duties. The laxity of health and safety regulations provides another attraction for investors, which, however, has very deleterious results for factory workers and local communities. This includes the occurrence of a number of deaths among women working in electronics plants that are thought to be linked to the exposure to toxic chemicals throughout the industry. These chemicals then go on to become toxic wastes, poisoning whole communities, after they are used in industrial production.\(^6\)

Capitalist development and the growth of export-processing industries has also meant the expansion and transformation of other aspects of Malaysia’s economy. Malay women now regularly travel from rural villages to nearby towns or to the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, seeking work in the clerical, sales and service sectors. They take jobs as office clerks, typists, telephone operators, salesperson in Chinese-owned stores, beauticians, or workers in the tourist industry, thus entering occupations that are heavily feminized in both developed and dependent societies. The recent moves toward privatization of much of the public sector, including the postal, telecommunications, and transportation services, will affect several of these jobs. If trends in other countries are any indication, women clerical and service workers are likely to experience falling wages and greater job insecurity.

In Negeri Sembilan as well as in some other areas of Malaysia, other women, while remaining in their rural environment, are drawn further into the petty-commodity production of rubber. The tapping of rubber by Malay smallholders began in the colonial era but has undergone an expansion during the post-colonial period, resulting in the entry of more women into this economic activity. Although they remain outside of the formal wage-work system, the participation of these women in small-scale rubber production ties their income more closely to international fluctuations in the demand for natural rubber and increases their vulnerability to downturns in the global capitalist economy. All of these women – whatever their form of employment – likewise find themselves increasingly dependent on mass-produced commodities, supplied

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3. Ibid., 34.
5. Until recently, workers in the electronics industry were prevented from unionizing either through joining existing unions or forming their own organizations (Rohana Ariffin, "Women and Trade Unions in West Malaysia", Journal of Contemporary Asia, Vol. 19, no. 1 (1989)). Partly as a result of a US threat to withdraw favored trading privileges, Malaysia has now announced the acceptance of unions in the electronics industry, at least in principle. However, only in-house unions are allowed and attempts to actually form unions often result in serious harassment and threats to workers (Jim Stockton, "Poisoned Factories and Techno-Fantasies", International Viewpoint #214 (Oct. 14, 1991)). Recent international pressure, led by the International Metalworkers Federation acting through the ILO, is being brought to bear on the Malaysian government to change these policies (Vatikiotis, "Credibility Gap: Union Issue Mars Image as Third World Leader", Far Eastern Economic Review (July 16, 1992).
through a competitive market framework, to meet basic needs for food, clothing, and housing as well as to provide new necessities such as televisions, running water, school uniforms, and motorbikes.

The situation in Negeri Sembilan – where the traditional matrilineal system ensured women's access to productive resources, promoted their active participation in economic and community life, and encouraged a high valuation of women's roles – clearly shows the undermining of women's status as a result of capitalist development. While both younger and older Negeri Sembilan women continue their active participation in the changing economy, women's traditional roles are being devalued and there is emerging a situation of unequal male and female access to important new resources. In this case, the most positive aspect of Malay women's growing participation in the capitalist sector is their increasing interaction with women from other ethnic groups and from other regions of the country. This may help to break down long-standing prejudices and create a stronger basis for worker and female solidarity.

**Women's Everyday Forms of Resistance**

The ways in which Malay women cope with and attempt to resist some of the harsher aspects of this new economic order are not, however, primarily through forms of labour or feminist activism familiar in the West. Instead, their strategies of survival and resistance depend to a large extent on maintaining traditional co-operative practices that were part of their indigenous cultures and extending these traditions to their new circumstances. This is particularly clear in Negeri Sembilan, where the matrilineal system promoted both communal and female-centered forms of economic and social organization.

The persistence of traditional forms of work and property is a good example. Negeri Sembilan women, in spite of their growing involvement in the wage economy, continue to practice subsistence rice-farming and cash-cropping in the form of rubber-tapping. Rice production is carried out on inherited land, and produces a crop that is shared among kin but never sold on the market. Rubber-tapping requires the initial purchase of land from the national government and then eventually the sale of the semi-processed latex to a rubber dealer in town. Negeri Sembilan Malays own both their rice fields and their rubber trees in a pattern more typical of matrilineal than of capitalist land tenure. They refuse to treat such property as a commodity to be bought and sold, but regard it as a resource in which lineage-mates collectively share interest.

Negeri Sembilan people, and to a certain extent Malays in other areas of the country, maintain these traditional forms of property and work to supplement their generally meager wages and to have something to fall back on during frequent periods of forced or voluntary withdrawal from paid employment. This is particularly important for women whose position in the wage economy remains at the lower levels and is more precarious than that of men: at least some multinationals prefer to lay off women after a few years of employment or when they reach their mid-20s.

In addition, by combining "village work" with employment in the factories, offices, and shops in nearby towns, women can maintain a greater degree of control over their own work lives and more easily perform other valued roles, such as caring for children or organizing rituals. As a form of everyday resistance, such practices forestall complete absorption into the system of wage labour and decrease people's dependence on the market. They also limit the degree to which employers can impose despotic regimes on female workers, since women can always quit and return home to the work of subsistence and petty-commodity production.

A most interesting example is the application of matrilineal principles of ownership to the "new resource" of education. In
Negeri Sembilan, there is particular emphasis on the education of daughters, which tends to be a collective effort. The student is expected to reciprocate by sharing the skills and opportunities she gains through her education with her extended family of matrikin. By promoting the education of daughters and doing it in a traditionally co-operative way, Negeri Sembilan women resist to a certain extent both the male bias of state educational systems and the competitive values encouraged through the process of schooling itself.

While this approach to education is specific to Negeri Sembilan, Malay women throughout the peninsula attempt to maintain extended family networks. The family pattern in contemporary Negeri Sembilan is still based on the traditional matrilineal model – with descent passing through women and the core relationships centered around mothers, daughters, and sisters. In other regions of the country, families are structured more as in the West – with kinship being traced “on both sides”. While family members now tend to live farther apart and to be engaged in different forms of work, the kinds of resources and forms of aid that are shared between female kin are now more diverse and also more critical for basic survival.

An extension and ritualization of such forms of collective support is provided through participation in traditional feasts (kenduri). Such feasts are held at all life-cycle transitions, with the largest and most elaborate (involving upwards of 500-1,000 people) occurring at the occasion of marriage. Besides their religious meaning, feasts provide an important mechanism for economic re-distribution and political discussion, functions that are becoming more crucial in the current era of growing economic stratification and political repression.

Women throughout Malaysia have important responsibilities for feasting. In Negeri Sembilan they play the central role in organizing kenduri. Women do most of the organizing of the event, making decisions about it, and managing the collection of necessary resources. They spend much more time than men working together to put on the feast, in the course of which they discuss local and sometimes even national or international issues that affect themselves and their communities. It is significant that in spite of substantial pressure from national elites and Islamic fundamentalists to abandon such practices, Malays still actively participate in kenduri and depend on the exchanges they promote.

Combining these traditional forms of economy, family, and ritual with the new economic and social relations imposed by capitalism helps Malay women meet some of their most basic needs and resist certain new forms of exploitation. However, as a result of the interpenetration of pre-capitalist and capitalist forms, such traditions can also be distorted and undermined. For example, the kenduri has begun under pressures created by the market to take on a dynamic of competitive display.

Traditional practices can also be used to further the exploitation of women by corporations. For example, the tradition of communal child care, one of the functions still carried out by the extended family, is very important for the well-being of Malay children. But it also “frees” their mothers to spend long hours at wage-earning jobs often located far from their village homes, and relieves the companies employing these women from responsibility for providing this service themselves.

The persistence of rice farming and rubber-tapping and of traditional forms of collective property can also benefit international and local capitalists. For one thing, it relieves employers from paying even survival-level wages, since the assumption can be made

that young female (and even male) workers will continue to be subsidized by their rural kin. The continued involvement of Malay women in traditional forms of economic and social support may also dampen certain kinds of political and working-class militancy, again to the benefit of capital.

Two additional examples of the maintenance and re-working of long-standing traditions to confront new forms of exploitation further reveal these contradictory dynamics. These are the occurrence of spirit possession among factory women and the involvement of female students and workers in Islamic revival.

Spirit Possession

The phenomenon of spirit possession or ghost attack (kena hantu) is a good example of the use of traditional ideology by Malay women to confront new circumstances created by capitalist development. Kena hantu serves as an indigenous explanation for various kinds of illness, especially psychological distress and dysfunction. In the past, illnesses of middle-aged rural women were commonly attributed to spirit possession, which tended to draw attention to the economic and social as well as psychological causes of their poor health. Healing took place through a series of special rituals that gathered support around the distressed woman, re-integrated her into the communal milieu, and also encouraged actual changes in her economic and social circumstances.

In the last two decades, ghost attacks have been occurring most frequently not among older women in village settings but rather among young women on the production floors of multinational factories. When the attacks occur in a factory setting, they usually take on a mass character as the initial sighting of a hantu travels up and down the assembly line until several young women fall prey to the malevolent spirit. The possessed women (or, more precisely, the ghosts speaking through the women’s voices) scream out specific complaints about their working conditions, especially railing against abuses of factory managers or foremen. Such outbursts may reveal that the spirit’s anger results from the very location of the multinational factory on sacred ground.

Management usually tries to contain the attacks, sometimes firing the women who are perceived as leaders, especially if they are “repeat offenders”. Often, though, if the attack is extensive enough, the factory has to be closed for several days or even weeks as traditional healers are brought in to perform cleansing ceremonies. Sometimes, repeated episodes of kena hantu prompt management to make changes in the schedules, pace, and general working conditions of their plant. In these cases, spirit possession serves, to a limited degree, to force an actual restructur- ing of the process of industrial production.8

Islamic Revival

Another recent phenomenon that contrasts in some important ways with spirit possession is women’s involvement in Islamic revival. Since the mid-1970s, this revival, known in Malaysia as dakwah, has been growing in strength and fervor, capturing the attention and commitment of many in the Malay community. While exhibiting its own local particularities, the Malaysian revival is linked conceptually, and to an extent organizationally, to the recent wave of Islamic fundamentalism and militancy gripping many other Muslim societies.

Dakwah represents both an effort at fundamentalist religious reform and also an expression of social protest against current policies of the Malaysian state. The revival presents an ambivalent and somewhat contradictory perspective on questions concerning women’s rights and roles — for example, some currents encourage higher education

for women but then criticize their participation in forms of employment that often follow. It has, however, the potential to introduce serious restrictions on women’s lives, ranging from curtailing their traditional access to property to campaigns enforcing more rigid sexual codes.

In Negeri Sembilan during the period of my fieldwork, a large percentage of dakwah participants were young women. They could be easily identified by their long dresses and veils, which are not traditional for Malay women, that mark their newly found commitment. The adherents of the movement throughout Malaysia are predominantly young people, both women and men, who are more highly educated than the norm. Many are university students being groomed for membership in the new professional and technical classes, though they may find work only in relatively low-paid white-collar or public-service jobs. The militancy of the revival on college campuses and among university students may be significantly moderating. By the mid-1980s there was, however, growing interest in the revival among industrial workers, especially women employed in the free-trade zones.

Dakwah can be seen as primarily a reaction against the socio-economic stress and the cultural corrosion brought by capitalist development. It also provides a nationalistic focus for the Malay community in opposition to the cultural and economic domination of the West. At the same time, the revival emphasizes distinctions between Malays, on the one hand, and Chinese and non-Muslim Indians, on the other, thus deepening ethnic divisions within Malaysia itself.

In Negeri Sembilan, the participation of young, well-educated women in the revival can best be understood as a response to their sense of exclusion from the traditional matrilineal system and their less than satisfying experiences in the expanding capitalist economy. No matter what their particular form of employment, women find few cultural models of female roles in this Westernized environment – which thrives on romance magazines, sexually-driven advertising, and U.S. soap operas and pop stars – to replace the more positive images of women in their traditional cultures. Their sense of economic and cultural dislocation can be extreme, leading them to seek a radical alternative. The dakwah, with its links both to their own cultural roots and to a world-wide upsurge of Islamic militancy, provides such an alternative for a growing number of young Malay women.

The impact of the movement on what remains of traditional Malay culture as well as on emerging capitalist relations is, however, complex and contradictory. For example, the movement affirms and promotes Malay-Muslim identity and culture in opposition to foreign consumer culture. Some movement leaders also raise sharp criticisms concerning the role of foreign corporations in their country and the Malaysian government’s own economic policies; this includes objections to the treatment of women in multinational factories. At the same time, in the context of local village life, the effect of the revival is often to promote the transformation from co-operative to capitalist forms and to mask certain newly-developing exploitative relations. In Negeri Sembilan, the movement threatens to further undermine important aspects of the matrilineal culture, such as the communal ownership of property, that are essential for women’s equality and autonomy.

In terms of the personal lives of most women adherents, I would suggest that their new-found faith provides social support, a new cultural model, and a degree of self-esteem. For a minority of devotees, the dakwah movement actually helps them focus and articulate their growing criticism of their country’s course of dependent capitalist development.

and its impact on their own lives. For these female adherents, conscious resistance and protest are part of their commitment to Islamic revival. Such resistance, however, is also characterized by a denial of aspects of their traditional cultures that ensured their rights and freedoms as women, as well as the acceptance of new forms of social and sexual oppression imposed by the movement itself.

Future Prospects

As a result of criticisms from Third World women themselves, recent accounts not only describe victimization of women in the Third World but also take note of and often celebrate the forms of resistance women mount against their own exploitation and against injustices visited on their communities. In Malaysia, many of these forms of resistance creatively draw from Malayan women’s own indigenous cultures to provide some protection against or to protest new inequities brought by the capitalist transformation. At the same time, we must be careful not to romanticize the use of traditional practices as vehicles of resistance by overlooking the ways these practices can become undermined and distorted by their encounter with the world capitalist system, or by failing to note the contradictions some of these forms of protest contain within themselves. One thing that may determine how well such “everyday forms of resistance” continue to address women’s needs and interests is the degree to which they can be incorporated into more consciously organized struggles for political and economic change that are led by working class women themselves.

While there are a number of individual feminist thinkers as well as national women’s organizations — primarily women’s sections of political parties, social organizations affiliated to these parties, and social welfare organizations — there is currently no activist feminist movement in Malaysia that regularly takes up women’s issues or that speaks in the interests of the majority of women. Instead most of these organizations — including the largest, Wanita UMNO, the women’s section of the ruling Malay party — have “the effect of reducing women to playing supporting roles in male-dominated organizations and institutions”. The current situation is in part a result of government repression that discourages all forms of grassroots organizing, and that uses periodic crackdowns such as that of 1987-88 to target groups that take progressive positions on issues of concern to women.10

Although the labour movement suffers from similar repression, there appears to be some recent attention to rebuilding a more militant labour movement including developing links with unionists in nearby countries.11 However, Malaysian women do not play a role in the unions comparable to their large and growing numbers in the wage labour force. This is probably due to several factors including the traditional male domination of union structures and leadership positions, the unions’ lack of attention to or ghettoization of women’s concerns and issues, and the failure of unions to make specific provisions for example, for child care — that would facilitate women’s more active participation. There is also the problem of the gendered structure of employment which relegates women largely to the traditionally unorganized service, sales, and clerical sectors, or to the electronics industry which until very recently has been prohibited from unionizing.

In spite of women’s lack of participation in formal union bodies, there is some indication of their readiness to engage in labour organization and struggle. For example, in the late 1970s, a study by the Malaysian


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Trades Union Congress Research Committee found that women in the Free Trade Zones were most interested in joining or forming trade unions. And during the massive job losses of the mid-1980s, factory women did organize themselves to picket and protest outside the plants from which they had just been laid off. This suggests that the recent change in formal policy to permit unions in the electronics industry, along with growing pressure from the international labor movement to allow workers to actually organize and on the basis of national not just in-house unions, may be particularly significant. These developments could lead to openings through which women workers could begin to form their own organizations with their own agendas for change.

Even though more consciously organized efforts for change are still to be developed, Malay women’s strategies for resistance based on the maintenance and adaptation of aspects of their traditional cultures are and will remain crucial. Continued involvement in subsistence farming, communal feasting, and spirit possession are creative responses to new forms of exploitation and help buffer women from some of the harsher results of dependent capitalist development. And while these “everyday forms of resistance” cannot by themselves bring about the kinds of changes necessary to end women’s or workers’ exploitation, they can contribute to the development of strong and vital political movements that are firmly rooted in local cultural traditions and perspectives. Only through such a convergence can a movement be built that truly speaks to women’s needs and experiences and actively engages them in a struggle to preserve or change their society in ways they themselves choose.
Mexico: NAFTA versus Human Rights

By Carmen Valadez Prez

On the eve of the 21st century, women continue to suffer discrimination and/or marginalization; we continue to face sexism in all its forms. The distinctive feature of this end of the millennium is that today women form a growing, organized contingent, capable of making our own proposals, with roots in all sectors of society, despite the feminization of poverty and its consequences.

On Mexico's northern border, in the so-called "free-trade zone" – the old name for what is known under "modernization" as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) – class exploitation is dramatically combined with gender oppression. The border area throws into relief what it means to be a woman in a capitalist, patriarchal economy in crisis.

Mexico now has more than 2000 "maquiladora" plants, 84 percent of which are located on the northern border. Thanks to a programme launched in 1965, maquiladora plants have been able to import semi-finished manufactured goods duty-free for processing, final assembly, and re-export to the US. More than half a million workers, 70 percent of them women, are employed in these plants. The maquiladora industry is Mexico's largest source of hard currency and one of the U.S.'s main sources of profit.

If human rights violations are defined as the denial with direct participation of the state or that of any of its institutions of any right a human being may have, clearly women's human rights are constantly denied in the maquiladora industry. The implementation of NAFTA in Mexico will extend these violations to the entire country.

The governments of Mexico, the United States and Canada, together with the multinational corporations, planned women's super-exploitation. When considering setting up these plants, they studied who the best labour force would be and came up with young, single women with no work or union experience and little formal education (the majority have not finished primary school).

They believed the myth that women were "naturally" submissive, delicate and patient, and would accept without protest the monotonous assembly lines, the intensive, high-speed work and the long working days.

The current administration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari has tried to convince the country that with free, uncontrolled foreign investment, Mexico will become part of the First World as a US and Canadian "partner". The truth is that our semi-colonial country has been chosen as a "partner" because of the low cost of its workforce: low wages, bad working and safety conditions and almost complete lack of investment in public services.

When the workday is extended to 12 and 14 hours a day, this cheap labour force produces more. Women are chosen to fill these jobs for the simple reason that they are women. All this is a violation of the Mexican constitution and domestic labour legislation. It also violates...
the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and worldwide agreements sponsored by the International Labour Organization (ILO), just to mention a few documents signed by all three parties to NAFTA. All these clearly establish the state as the body responsible for guaranteeing women’s rights.

The Mexican state and its administrations have not only not guaranteed these rights and the conditions that would foster women’s development as human beings, they have gone so far as to offer foreign capital the best possible conditions for profit, putting production before the health and welfare of women and their families.

Mexican governments’ responsibility can be clearly demonstrated by examining their maquiladora industrial “development” plans since 1965, from the “Programme to Utilize the Excess Workforce on the Northern Border with the United States”, established in 1965, through the “Border Industrialization Programme”, right up to NAFTA.

The state prepared the terrain for women entering these projects as cheap, unprotected labour. It was supposedly to prevent just such an outcome that the 1962 amendments to Mexico’s federal labour legislation established the “equality” of rights and obligations in the workplace for men and women, at the same time prohibiting women from carrying out dangerous or unhealthy jobs while pregnant and banning them from nightwork. The maquila industry constantly violates these and other provisions while government officials refrain from any interference. The advent of NAFTA endangers the existence of many of these laws, not only in practice but even on paper.

**Women’s Conditions in the Maquila Industry**

From the moment a woman goes to look for a job at a maquila plant, her rights are violated. Most plants require a woman to present a doctor’s certificate testifying that she is not pregnant. A good number of maquiladoras offer the women, or even demand that they use, oral contraceptives or contraceptives by injection. Many also demand that the workers present proof every three months that they are not pregnant. Yellow unions sign agreements about working conditions behind the workers’ backs, establishing clauses like the worker’s obligation to inform the company of her pregnancy. This was the case of the Glen de Mexico plant agreement signed by the Revolutionary Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM), which violated a woman’s right to decide her own maternity for herself, since workers lose their jobs when they get pregnant.

With an average minimum wage of 150 new pesos a week (about $45.50 US), plus supermarket vouchers usable only for food items and at certain stores as punctuality and productivity bonuses, the real wage is very low. The productivity bonuses also stimulate savage competition among workers. Many women “choose” to work night shifts – often of more than 12 hours – in order to be able to take care of their children during the day. Often they must work overtime, although they are not paid overtime but regular wages, so that they can have Saturdays off and vacations at Christmas or Easter week.

Most workers’ benefits are limited to being signed up with Mexico’s national health and pension system, the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS). However, with “modernization”, most companies now have their own paramedics or nurses, thus allowing them to keep workers from leaving the plant for doctors’ appointments and saving them time on the assembly line.

Working conditions are unhealthy. The women handle chemicals and solvents directly, with no safety equipment. They work in large, gloomy, warehouse-type rooms, subjected to high noise levels, heat, fast production lines and continuous, monotonous movements. New pastel-colored façades and “pretty” little gardens in the factories are an attempt to hide the
damage to women's health and the stress caused by these working conditions.

The women suffer sexual harassment, to one degree or another, from both fellow workers and supervisors and managers. Despite the fact that sexual harassment is a crime, in practice the workers really have no legal recourse. Sexual harassment has been the spark that has ignited some women's struggles in the maquila plants, as in the case of an attempted rape at the Soliton plant in 1985 that set off a struggle that ended in the founding of Tijuana's first independent trade union.

Some shifts end in the middle of the night. Women leaving work then are prey to muggings, rape and other forms of assault: the roads are unlit, and there is no public or management-provided transportation.

The Triple Workday
Maquila workers have a double workday, like women workers the world over. But it often becomes a triple workday because they must accept overtime or double up on their shifts to earn a bit more. Then after working at the factory, they still have to go home and do the housework and take care of their children and husbands. They end up working up to 20 hours a day. Often a woman who works the night shift, getting off at 2 a.m., gets up at 5 or 6 a.m. to make her husband’s lunch, get her children up, dressed, fed and off to school, clean the house, wash the clothes, make the midday meal for the rest of the family and sometimes food to be sold ... and then go back to work.

Even when they are not at home, these women continue to be responsible for their children’s well-being. Most maquila workers are heads of households, whether they have husbands or not. Since there is a dearth of child-care centers, women (the majority of whom are between 16 and 24) have to leave their children without supervision or in care of a neighbour. That means that worry, besides the stress that they are subjected to at work, endangers both their physical and their mental health.

Shantytowns and Toxic Waste
Women make dusty, cracked-earth hills inhabitable by building their houses and planting bushes and trees that need very little water, since most poor neighbourhoods completely lack public utilities such as running water, electricity, sewage and drainage. Men and women from the service sector, the maquiladora plants and the informal sector of the economy, such as street vendors, all live in these shantytowns.

Besides these difficult conditions, shantytown dwellers have to deal with toxic waste. Recent data has indicated that Mexico’s 2000 maquiladora plants annually produce 20 million tons of toxic waste and that currently 100 million tons are inadequately stored. Different federal and border-state environmental-protection officials have stated that more than 60 percent of the maquilas violate the Ecological Balance Law. In particular, they break the regulations obliging them to return toxic or dangerous waste to its country of origin or prevent its disposal in the environment, especially in the surrounding communities and shantytowns where the majority of the border population lives.

Arrest warrants have been issued against the owners of maquiladoras for not adhering to environmental laws, thereby endangering the community and causing irreversible damage to inhabitants’ health, including birth defects or even death.

In Tijuana, the Alco Pacifico plant, owned by US investors, abandoned 50,000 tons of lead slag. Besides harming the health of their workers, who as of this writing have received no compensation, Alco Pacifico caused environmental damage that cost the community $20 million to clean up. The company only paid out $2 million after having completely polluted a dairy-producing valley.

The Ecology Commission of the State Congress of Baja California stated in June 1993...
that lead contamination in Tijuana has seriously affected the population's health. The Commission attributed deaths to the contamination and said that many of its repercussions have not yet been studied or revealed.

Every month there are accidents in maquila plants all along the border. Many cannot be hidden because of their magnitude. Many others simply go unreported. Over the last several years accidents and widespread contamination in Mexicali plants have prompted an exodus from local neighbourhoods. Residents' health needs are neither attended to nor followed up.

In December 1991, José Alfredo Cardiel Cordero, who worked in the Chromizing plant, died as a result of these conditions. A month later, in January 1992, 10,000 local residents of El Polvorín, González Ortega, Condor, Casas Eternas and Villa Verde neighbourhoods had to be evacuated because of a chloride gas leak and the smoke from a fire in the Qulmica Orgnica maquila plant. Today, 22-year-old Ubaldina, formerly a resident of Mexicali, has to live in a Tijuana government youth hostel to be close to the treatment she needs for the cancer she developed as a result of the January 1992 accident. Ubaldina has been denied the right to treatment by the IMSS (the health and pension system).

In the three months before this article was written – just before NAFTA came to a vote in the U.S. Congress – several accidents took place in Tijuana. Because of lack of proper safety measures for either the workers or the community, they have had tragic results.

On September 10, 1993, a methylene chloride spill in the Calinor plant led to the death by poisoning of two workers who had been issued no safety equipment whatsoever. The Calinor plant belongs to the Camarena Salinas family – relatives of President Salinas – one of whose members was recently named to head up Baja California’s IMSS. The accident brought to light the fact that Calinor workers were not enough signed up with the IMSS, a clear violation of labour legislation.

Residents of surrounding neighbourhoods are concerned about strange odours emanating from the plant. They fear another accident that could threaten the lives of not only Calinor workers but people in the community as well.

A recent scientific study determined that water, air and soil in the Cañon del Padre area of Tijuana are severely contaminated. The canyon has 25,000 residents. In the former ejido (rural commune) Chilpancingo, which has 250 contaminated wells, the study found different skin and scalp conditions among residents, plus ten cases of anencephalia (babies born without brains) and other congenital birth defects caused by pollution. (In the area around Ensenada, Baja California, where workers regularly use pesticides, 17 cases of anencephalia were detected in 1993 alone. Mexico today has the highest rate of anencephalic births in the world, with 18 recorded for every 10,000 births, although researchers think the actual figure is higher.)

On October 12, an explosion at Industrias Marqueras de California in Tijuana killed three workers handling solvents and paint thinner without safety equipment.

On October 14, 90 employees of Tijuana’s Fisher Price plant got food poisoning from food served in the canteen.

There are also plans to build a nuclear waste dump in Ward Valley, in the United States. The planned site would store nuclear waste in irregular ditches on the surface of the earth, situated over an underground river, just 18 miles (32 kilometers) from the Colorado river, which flows into Mexico. The waste site is located in the midst of the ecological preserve of the Mojave Desert tortoise.

In the border city of Ciudad Juarez, in the state of Chihuahua, the Candados Presto maquila plant has been cited as a polluter, while the Sonland Parck plant in the town of Nuevo Mexico has a chemical waste dump that is affecting the surrounding community.
In Reynosa, in the state of Tamaulipas, maquiladoras and Mexico's state-owned oil company, Pemex, dump toxic waste into the Rio Grande river. Cases like this can be found all along the border.

**Rights Denied, Rights Defended**

Several factors contribute, then, to a dramatic deterioration of the physical and mental health of border area residents in general and maquila workers in particular:

- low incomes: wages of $50 US a week or less;
- malnutrition: a basic food basket, excluding spending on clothing, shoes, medicine and of course recreation, would cost a worker seven times the minimum wage of $120 US a month;
- obstacles to the right to organize, both in the community and in the workplace;
- unhealthy living conditions: most residents do not have running water, electricity, sewage or paved streets; contaminated drums discarded from maquila plants are used for storing water;
- general lack of medical care, particularly pre-natal care and other reproductive health services;
- criminalized abortion, including in cases of deformed fetuses and danger to the mother's health.

These conditions violate women's right to good health, and in particular their reproductive rights. They are behind the increase in border cities of the number of babies born with congenital problems, ranging from low weight to ancephalia. Alterations in menstruation patterns and other reproductive problems are also on the rise.

This article only recounts a few examples of the pollution that women maquila workers and their families are subjected to by the maquila plants. They are cases that must be thoroughly investigated and followed up so that the victims can be adequately assisted and given their rightful compensation.

Different community organizations, women's human rights groups and particularly emerging maquila workers' organizations have demanded public scrutiny of these plants, their foreign owners, their Mexican administrators, and the different government officials involved in the cases.

There is growing discontent, spurring organization of maquila workers, both women and men, which has probably not reached its highest point yet. The resistance that until very recently only went on silently within the maquila plants themselves is no longer silent. Today, throughout the border area, different efforts are being made to organize maquila workers, community members, and, most recently, joint U.S. and Mexican resistance.

The adoption of NAFTA has in fact brought a resurgence of cross-border, class and gender solidarity focused on the maquila plants. The struggles of women maquila workers today take up class demands and also forge a gender identity that will give their movement the holistic dimension of a fight for their rights as women, as workers and as human beings.
The United States: The Family, Economic Crisis and People in Pain

By Stephanie Coontz

For the past few years, people in the United States have been debating the "crisis of the family". The US has the highest divorce rate in the world, higher child poverty rates than any advanced industrial nation except Australia, and almost twice the proportion of both teen births and teen abortions of any other industrial democracy. In addition, rates of youthful violence and suicide have risen dramatically over the past three decades. An astonishing 42 percent of all divorced, non-custodial fathers in the US have not seen their children in the last year. Teachers report that even children from affluent, two-parent homes seem to be suffering from a deficit of adult time and attention.

Similar upheavals are beginning to show up in most advanced capitalist nations. I will argue that the disruption of older patterns of family life, gender roles, and obligations to the young and old is in fact a general crisis of how to care for dependents and foster interdependency in the modern world. People tend to feel that crisis first in their families and personal lives. Often, they mistakenly but understandably attribute the pain associated with these changes to the breakdown of traditional family ties.

It's no wonder that people feel disoriented. Through most of recorded history, the family has been the major set of instructions for how households should assign personal roles in the social division of labour, redistribute goods to children, and order intergenerational relations between old and young. It is necessary to emphasize that the family is a social construct that varies from society to society, and within subgroups of each society, its definition and organization change over time. Nor is the family universal: Some groups use alternative units to organize the division of labour and the redistribution of goods. The Zinacantecos of southern Mexico have no word differentiating parents and children from other social groupings; instead, they identify the basic social unit as a "house". The Yoruba of Ondo do not define the rights or obligations of any social groupings purely in terms of kinship.

US Families: Myth and Reality

But most societies, and every society I know of that is divided by class and organized through a state apparatus, use the concept of "family" to both orchestrate and limit such distribution and re-distribution of rights and obligations. And in Euro-American societies, as well as many others, this organization has involved the subordination of women. Women have been kept dependent within the family in order to make them care for children, elders, the ill or the disabled. The United States has always been very explicit about using the family's division of labour to avoid or minimize the need to set up other centers of social assistance and redistribution. The US lagged behind every other advanced nation in giving aid to able-bodied male workers, but was a leader in offering pensions to widows. The message was (and is still in today's campaign against...
single mothers on welfare) that “normal” families would not need any help. The only individuals deserving government assistance are those that have tried to take care of dependents through the family wage system but have been prevented from doing so by death or disability – not by structural problems such as unemployment or inadequate wages, which many people in the US deny, nor by personal choice, such as refusing to get and stay married, which many condemn.

Part of the crisis of the family in the US stems from precisely what the right wing bemoans: the breakdown of an older sexual division of labour that gave individuals few options outside marriage, allowing society to pretend that all women had loving husbands who could earn high enough wages to support them, all children could be cared for and protected within the family circle, and any remaining dependencies were accidents of death or desertion, not structural parts of the system.

In fact, of course, many families, even twoparent ones, were unable to operate on this family wage system in the past, either economically or emotionally. But the existence of this form among many middle-class and unionized families, combined with massive cultural denial of alternative or failed families, allowed people in the US to postpone confronting the structural and moral limits of liberal capitalism. US society blithely assumed that untrammeled competition and wealth-getting could prevail in the public realm, while altruism and care-giving would be handled by the family.

Many forces have eroded the family wage system and the cultural hegemony of the gender roles that it sanctioned. Consumerism and individualism, for example, both of which stem from the operations of advanced capitalism and the ideology of private enterprise, have long made interpersonal commitments fragile in the US. But the most obvious rearrangements of the family system are those connected with the changing economic and social roles of women.

The simultaneous progress of industrialization, which draws women into the paid labour force, and of women’s liberation, which reflects women’s opposition to the contradictions and inequalities of their position both at work and at home, tends to break down the role of the family as the primary place where the redistribution of goods and services takes place. This is reinforced by the rise of gay liberation, single-parent families, one-person households, and the number of coupled households that have neither children nor elders in the home. It is easy for conservatives to blame the deterioration in some families’ standards of living on the diversification of all families’ household arrangements and gender roles.

These trends are evident in many modern societies. The forms they take and reactions they inspire will be different elsewhere from in the US, because the US has some very peculiar cultural ideas about religion, the family and sexuality. But I think that in most places you will see the right wing leap upon the family issue and recycle its old racist programmes, its old economic and political programmes, under the guise of preserving the family. I will describe the United States situation; others can fill in where other countries’ experiences are parallel and where they’re not.

Dimensions of Pain

In the United States at least, and probably in many other countries, left and feminist responses to the breakdown of the family wage system have not always taken into account the dimensions of the change or the dimensions of the pain involved in that change.

In the United States, for example, half of all marriages now incurred will end in divorce before the fortieth anniversary. Sixty percent of all second marriages will do so. One half of all US children spend some years of their childhood in a single-parent family. These single-parent families, on the average, have many problems. Averages in fact make bad social policy: correlations are not causes. But
children in single-parent families have higher arrest records than those who live with both parents; are more likely to be poor; are more likely to have problems at school; and are more likely to express extreme distress. Children of “step-families” (children living with remarried parents) are even more likely to have these problems: they have an even higher school failure rate and drop-out rate.

These are not necessary consequences of single-parent families or step-families. Usually they are consequences of the failure to build new values and new support systems. For example, the problems in step-families come because people cling to their old assumptions about how children must have an exclusive relationship to a mother or father. Of course in these situations children have two mothers or fathers, one inside the home and one outside. One cannot expect those children to have exclusive relationships. Unless people change their expectations, their children will be in great distress. So it’s not: the family form itself, but the form in the absence of new guidelines, new values, new ways of operating, that is painful. But the pain is real.

There are also real problems associated with women working. In the United States the average work-week is more than forty hours a week. We have almost no regulation of child care. The result is that children are dropped off at child care at six or seven in the morning and not picked up until six at night, and often left in totally inadequate facilities. These are not insurmountable problems. We can take the Swedish approach of reducing the work-week. We can take an approach, as many companies have done in the US, of building creches at the workplace, so that parents can spend breaks and lunch hours with their children. We can expand our leave policies. But I think when feminism first started we were too optimistic about how quickly this would happen. We have not adequately accounted for the tremendous pain and upset that occurs as parental time out of the home increases so rapidly.

As long as feminists and leftists pretend that there are no problems, the right wing can make considerable progress by saying to people, “We know you’re in pain. And we have the answer: all this pain comes from the breakdown of the traditional family.” Twenty-two percent of children in the US – 48 percent of African-American children – are now in poverty. According to the right wing, this is because of the collapse of the family.

Despite the fact that only a minority in the US responded to the right-wing programme for families, both liberals and conservatives have tended to accept the right-wing analysis of the problem. Liberal commentators and the Progressive Policy Institute, the main Democratic Party think-tank, have joined in a chorus of claims that deviation from the “two-parent paradigm” is the main cause of current social problems and that “the best anti-poverty programme for children is a stable, intact family”.

“Traditional” Families: Part of the Problem

There are new problems in many US families, and some of them do come from recent rearrangements of family life in a society where old institutions and value systems clash with new behaviours and beliefs. We should be concerned about the erosion of social and personal commitments in the US. But many of these problems stem from social and economic factors beyond the family. Often a return to “traditional” family forms and values would add to the problems, not help to solve them.

First of all, many of the problems were not solved, only hidden, by the traditional family. I don’t like the phrase, “the feminization of poverty”, for example, because women and children have always borne the brunt of poverty: just as surely in a two-parent family, though less visibly, than in a one-parent family. In the United States, we have differential malnutrition rates going way back in history showing that women and children in two-parent families are more likely to be
malnourished than men. Budget studies show that women and children have often
given up needed proteins in order to feed the male “breadwinner”. In many countries we
have even more shocking statistics about women’s health, impoverishment, and even
infanticide. Furthermore, the phrase “the feminization of poverty” ignores the fact that
poverty is still widespread among many men. We must never lose sight of that, or we
will deflect ourselves from our potential alliances.

Child exploitation as well is certainly not new. While rates of child abuse are shock-
ing, at least they indicate that people are reporting it as abuse. In the old days it used
to be thought of as just a parental preroga-
tive. In the Anglo-American tradition vio-
ence against women was absolutely accept-
ed right up until the mid-19th century. There was a law in Anglo-American coun-
tries: a man could beat his wife until she was
senseless – defined as losing control of her
bodily functions – so long as he did not use a
stick broader than his thumb. We have an
expression, “rule of thumb”: this is its ori-
gin.

Many of the myths we have about how fami-
lies used to function are not true. Families
were not formerly places of love and affec-
tion and peacefulness. Neither did they sup-
port themselves. This is, I think, a particu-
larly American myth, which is seeping into
other countries: the idea that once upon a
time families took care adequately of depen-
dents, stood on their own two feet and did
not need government help. In fact we can
see throughout history that families are too
small a unit to provide for all dependencies.
They have always required outside commu-
nity and state support. In the US the two
most romanticized families, the Western
pioneer family and the 1950s family,
received far more government subsidy than
any poor family in US history has ever
received. It’s important to point out that the
family never solved many social problems.

Some of the changes in family life are good.
Women do have more independence. As late
as the 1950s in the US, women were being
diagnosed as schizophrenic, and sometimes
subjected to electric shock treatments, if
they expressed unhappiness with domestic
life. Women who reported incest were told
by Freudian therapists that this was an
unconscious Oedipal fantasy – that they
were making it up. It’s good that women are
now much more often believed, that they can leave
an abusive marriage. A woman can make a
choice now to have a child out of wedlock,
and if she is in a certain social position this
need not have negative effects. Child abuse
is now seen as a crime. I think that these are
positive social changes.

The Torn Social Safety Net

Nevertheless, there are new economic and
social problems. The question is: Do they
come from collapse of the family? In fact,
some of them come from the collapse of
the social safety net outside families.

In the United States one of the big lies – and
I think this is spreading in many European
countries – is that social-welfare pro-
grames make things worse, that they
increase dependency. In fact, during the
1950s, before the expansion of the US social
welfare system, in the heyday of two-parent
families, 30 percent of children in the US
were poor: a higher figure than today. Fifty
percent of African-American married-cou-
ple families were poor: a much higher figure
than today.

Recent declines in children’s health and
well-being are not in relationship to the
1950s but in relationship to 1970, which
was the high point of social-welfare pro-
grames in the US. Child well-being increased from the 1950s all the way
through the non-traditional 1960s, hit a
high point in 1970, stayed there until 1975-
79, and only then, with the cutbacks in social
programmes, began to fall.

Other problems of course are caused by
the new economic situation in the United
States today. It’s true that single-parent
families are more likely to be poor than

Women’s Lives in the New Global Economy • Penny Duggan & Heather Dashner, editors
two-parent families, due partly to discriminatory wages for women and partly to the growth of low-wage work that makes one income inadequate to support a family. But family dissolution is often the result rather than the cause of economic and social stress. Poor parents are twice as likely to divorce as more affluent ones, poor jobless individuals are three times less likely to marry in the first place, and teens who live in areas of high unemployment and inferior social services are much more likely to become unwed parents than other teens. Furthermore, the US tolerates higher levels of child poverty in every family form than any other major industrial democracy. The fastest-growing poverty group in the US since 1979 has been married-couple families with children. Job and wage structures, not family structures, account for most poverty in the US.

Furthermore, we know that most of the bad outcomes associated with some non-traditional family forms are caused by their prior problems, poverty and social stigma rather than their form. When you control for this in the statistics, most of the problems associated with single-parent families go away. For example, in almost every country, the child of divorced parents does on average a little worse than the child of two-parent families. But those averages are misleading, because families that divorce are more likely to have had strong conflicts. Families that are functioning well are less likely to get divorced. If you compare families that have conflict but stay together with families that get divorced, the children in the divorced families are no worse off, and often better.

The disruption associated with divorce is a problem: Divorces often lead to the loss of a home for the wife and relocation for the children. One of the most interesting (and for a parent, humbling) studies shows that loss of the continuity of peer groups and of sense of place is much more traumatic for children than the loss of one parent. So policies should minimize such disruption, not prohibit divorce.

Understanding—or Prejudice?

Finally, another factor, which surely applies to many other countries as well: social stigma. The experiment has been done many times. Teachers are divided randomly into two groups. Each group is shown an identical videotape showing identical behaviour by the same child. Each group is asked to evaluate the child’s academic and social skills. One group is told that the child’s parents are together; the other group is told that the child lives with a divorced mother. The second group of teachers always describes the child more negatively on every scale than the first group. So the prejudices go very, very deep.

Differential arrest records reflect the same prejudice. Studies show that police are far more likely to release the child of a two-parent family back to his or her parents with a lecture, where for the same offense the child of a one-parent family will be booked and given an arrest record.

Before people embrace the view that marriage is the best antidote to poverty, educational failure and psychological distress, they might take a look at the two-parent families devastated by job losses in steel, defense, timber and auto – families whose children now exhibit most of the emotional and cognitive problems generally blamed on divorce.

I have suggested that the crisis of the family in the late 20th-century United States – and many other parts of the world – is in many ways a larger crisis of social reproduction: a major upheaval in the way we produce, reproduce and distribute goods, services, power, economic rewards and social roles, including those of class and gender. The notion that we can solve this crisis by reviving traditional family forms and values is not only unrealistic but positively dangerous.

In fact, given recent changes in the occupation and income structure, workforce, political climate and cultural milieu, some traditional values and family arrangements do
more harm than good. Recent research on step-families, for example, suggests that many of their predicaments stem from the fact that traditional negative stereotypes and prejudices still prevail among teachers, psychological researchers and the general public, while no new values, guidelines or support systems have evolved to nourish the strengths that many step-families do exhibit.

A more extreme example of a traditional cluster of values that is part of the problem rather than the solution is found in cases of incest and other forms of child sexual abuse. The sexual abuse of children is overwhelmingly a family affair, and it reproduces very traditional power relations of age or gender. Incest tends to occur in families with strong patterns of paternal dominance and authoritarianism, along with values reinforcing the passivity of women and children. Incestuous fathers and step-fathers, as well as the more rare but still real incestuous mothers, tend to be socially isolated, to have an intra-family orientation, and to strongly value family "privacy".

Women batterers of children, while violating traditional assumptions of maternal patience and compassion, tend to hold very traditional values about the centrality of motherhood in women's identity. These values often lead them to bear children that they do not really want or to harbour unrealistic expectations of the fulfillment they will find in their children — expectations that lead to frustration and rage when they are not met. Indeed, most teens who become pregnant at an early age are not acting out of liberation. They are not girls who have been influenced by feminism or who have aspirations for education or a career. Instead, they tend to have very strong dependency needs and to fantasize about finding themselves through motherhood.

Old-Fashioned Rapists

Men who institute violence against women tend to hold "old-fashioned" views of male prerogatives and women's place. Rape is a complicated issue because it lies along a continuum, on one end of which is the "normal" toleration of male sexual aggression and the assumption of female responsibility for establishing sexual limits. No identifiable pathology or unique value system separates the rapist from the respectable married man next door. But a recent study of college men who raped and a control group who did not found some intriguing differences that fly in the face of most stereotypes about the strengths of "traditional" families. The rapists' families were far more likely than those of the non-rapists to contain wives who were full-time homemakers.

The rapists' hostility correlated with a family pattern in which the fathers were successful career men who disappointed their children by their physical and emotional distance. Rapists were more likely to feel hostile toward their distant fathers than toward their mothers. But when they did express negative feelings toward their mothers, in a psychological dynamic that transferred their hatred of their fathers away from the men who, after all, they were going to have to grow up to be, these tended to revolve around a fear that the mothers might hinder them from carving out their own "masculine" identity — a common enough problem in "traditional" families that make women exclusively responsible for child-rearing and emotional bonding. Cross-cultural research suggests that such sex identity conflicts, and the male violence that often results from them, occur much more frequently in societies that impose a strict sexual division of labour in child-rearing and production than in societies where there is a more egalitarian sharing of responsibility between men and women.

At the same time, I am convinced that there is a significant amount of change in notions of social obligation that is both unprecedented and destructive, and cannot be explained by poverty alone: the callousness, the alienation, the lack of commitment that we see in many US families. Some of the problems come from the tremendous, growing gap between rich and poor. The United States is one of the wealthiest countries in the world. It has luxuries and privileges available to a
very wide network of upper-middle-class people, but at the same time has a group of people whose prospects are abysmal in cities that look like they were just hit by a hurricane yesterday, and who have no access to work. I think that this kind of rub between visible riches and poverty always creates callousness on both sides of the economic divide.

The Bankruptcy of Liberal Individualism

But I also think that the economic transformation in advanced capitalism, the breakdown of traditional work expectations, which is world-wide, and the bankruptcy of traditional family forms have brought us to a very clear point the moral bankruptcy of liberal individualism.

The "moral life cycle" of most middle-class US families in the period of post-war prosperity was based on the assumption of a common upward trajectory, tightly connected to family status. Youths who deferred to adults would progress through the system to a higher status in middle age, gaining a single-family home that would provide them with security in their old age. Community solidarity was achieved through the fact that most of one's neighbors were experiencing the same rites of passage, so that young families could share child-care and school activities while older couples could expect to be self-sufficient. Gender roles were based on any well-thought-out principles than on the simple fact that both husband and wife made gains from marriage that they could not make outside it.

But this mode of organizing family, community and gender was based on wage, work and housing conditions that ceased to prevail in the 1970s and 1980s and 1990s. And it turns out that the values associated with these roles, already seriously flawed in their effect on racial minorities, women, gay and lesbians, or the poor, tended to show their underside, even in more privileged white middle-class families, when the economic incentives behind them ceased to operate.

The pressures against commitment exerted by traditional Western individualism and consumerism were greatly magnified in the late 1970 and 1980 by the ways in which socio-economic and political changes exacerbated inequality and removed most of the rewards that used to be associated, however imperfectly, with hard work, thrift and planning. While most people in the US worked harder and longer during the 1980s, for example, only to stay in one place or even fall behind, some of them did very well indeed. Between 1977 and 1986, 84 percent of all income growth went to the top one-fifth of the population. Measured in constant dollars, the top 5 percent of households increased their after-tax income by 60 percent between 1977 and 1988, and the top 1 percent increased their income by 122 percent.

In both 1986 and 1987, by contrast, the poorest two-fifths of US families, black and white, received a smaller share of national family income - just over 15 percent - than had been recorded since 1947, when the Census Bureau first began collecting this data. By 1990, the total income of the richest 1 percent of people in the US, after taxes, was just about the same as the total income shared by the poorest 40 percent; the income of the richest 5 percent of US families today is roughly the same as that of the entire bottom 60 percent. The average Chief Executive Officer of a major US corporation makes 160 times as much as his average employee (and I use the masculine pronoun on purpose, of course).

The erosion of social solidarities and civic duty, the declining appeal of deferred gratification, and the growth of cynicism are not unique to the poor, to minorities, or to people who reject "tradition". They are built into the mainstream culture's response to recent socio-economic trends. American youngsters do not have to look to any so-called under-class in order to learn that deferred gratification is for suckers. The lesson is driven home by Wall Street speculators, corporate raiders, and savings and loan criminals.

The spread of both consumerism and poverty, along with the global restructuring of
work and of gender roles, have left many people with absolutely no way to conceive of having obligations. Their only way had been: If you are married to someone then you have a duty to your spouse; or if you are a parent, to your child. Now this is obviously an inadequate way of organizing society.

Towards an Ethics of Community

The private family has always been amoral in its elevation of blood ties above class and community networks. If the only way we can think about morality and obligation to others is on the basis of whether they are a potential marriage partner or a product of our own loins, we have a very truncated view of inter-dependence. If the only way we can consider relating to people in a non-competitive, non-contractual way is by bringing them into our family, the possibilities for social co-operation are obviously very narrow.

More and more, we are seeing that the private nuclear family is not just an inadequate basis for community. It is also far too fragile, in both structure and ideology, to sustain bonds of commitment even among its immediate members. It provides little protection from the excesses of me-first individualism. When we conceptualize obligation not to our community but only to our family, where are the outside supports, other than coercion, for obligation inside the family? When the family is the only place where commitment and altruism are expected to prevail, what is to prevent people from abandoning that one burden for the freedom from obligation that exists everywhere else?

In the context of widespread economic deterioration, combined with successful resistance by many to being coerced into traditional family relations, it turns out that the nuclear family leaves children extraordinarily vulnerable. They are only one death, one divorce, one disagreement even one blood test, according to some recent US legal cases — away from having nothing.

That fear of nothingness is why the right-wing analysis of the crisis of the family resonates. It is also why the right-wing solution is no solution at all. By directing our attention only to people that we can love and are related to, the "family values" campaign weakens and attenuates our ability to conceive of other relationships. What we need is a way to relate to people, to communicate with people, and to collaborate with people whom we do not love, whom we will never love, whom we would not want in our families. We need a sense of moral obligation that does not depend on love or biological relatedness.

In many cases, we will have to invent new traditions to accomplish this. But if answers must be sought in the past, there are traditions prior to that of the nuclear family. My own favorite example of a tradition that valued people and children without depending on a patriarchal family comes from the Montagnais-Naskapi Indians of North America. When the Jesuits from France first came to the Naskapi Indians, there was one element of Naskapi society that they thought was very uncivilized: the freedom that women had. One Jesuit asked, "If you allow your wives such freedom, how will you know that the children they bear belong to you?" To this the Naskapis' reply was: "You French people love only the children of your body; but we love all the children of the band." When we do draw on tradition, it seems to me that that is a much stronger tradition to take into the 21st century than the set of myths, half-truths, and repressions that the right-wing family values campaign seeks to foist on us.

(This text has been adapted from a lecture given at the International Institute for Research and Education)
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Women's Lives in the New Global Economy (NSR n° 22) links together transformations that are affecting women in factories and farms, as peddlars and professionals, as neighbours, mothers and wives, in old age and even in the womb. Twelve feminist activists and scholars on five continents describe sweeping changes that are being brought about by the growth of world trade, regional economic integration (EU/NAFTA/ MERCOSUR), and austerity policies that respond to pressures for “competitiveness”. Focussing sometimes on working conditions, sometimes on family life, sometimes on the interaction of gender, class, race and caste, they show how much capital’s projects for economic reorganization depend on women’s cheap labour in the Third World, “flexible” labour in advanced capitalist countries and unpaid labour in homes everywhere. And they show how from Sweden to Malaysia new forms of women’s oppression are stimulating new forms of women’s resistance.

These contributions are the product of several years of sessions at the International Institute for Research and Education devoted to examining women’s place in society. In all their diversity, they illustrate how activists collaborating within a shared frame of reference can use their different experiences to develop a truly international analysis of the processes at work today.