

WOMEN IN THE LABOUR WORLD. WHAT ABOUT THE COMMITMENT?

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At the World Summit on Social Development in 1995, governments from around the world committed themselves to promoting the goal of full employment and the rights of workers (Commitment 3). At the Fourth World Conference on Women the same year, governments committed to the necessary advancement of women. Three years later, the goal of full employment and the rights of women workers is still more fantasy than reality. While more attention is paid to women's rights, in most cases, discourse has not been translated into comprehensive, pro-woman worker policies. Most governments have been reluctant to make substantive policy changes. Structural adjustment and free trade are primary obstacles to the realisation of full employment.

In this context, achievement of «secure and sustainable livelihoods [for women] through freely chosen productive employment and work» is at best limited. Women are over-represented among the unemployed and under-employed. With the feminisation of poverty on the rise, these failures represent more than empty words and abstract theories: women are going hungry, living without shelter, dying in childbirth, and suffering from poor quality of life.

THE POSSIBILITY OF FULL EMPLOYMENT

After World War II, most industrialised countries were considered to have achieved full employment. The 1996/1997 International Labour Organisation (ILO) report on world

employment states that full employment is still a valuable policy goal, but it is not the government objective it was prior to 1972.²

Today, Eastern European countries are more committed to liberalisation, privatisation, and the transition to market economy than to the full employment goals of the past. Women's employment has suffered, in part due to cuts in social services that enabled women to compete. In the Russian Federation before the transition, women's wages were 70% of men's wages; now, women earn 40% of what men earn.³

In Western Europe, governments are scrambling to deal with high unemployment rates. Macroeconomic policies seem to result in women losing their jobs at rates equal to or higher than men. In Finland, while unemployment among men and women increased, women's unemployment is declining slower than men's unemployment. Germany, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom have adopted improved maternity leave and child care services and Germany and the UK are investing in women's job training.⁴

Full employment is far from reality in most African countries, where crippling foreign debt and structural adjustment programmes wreak havoc. In sub-Saharan Africa, retrenchment has meant high unemployment. Women lose their jobs before men. In Tanzania, women are let go first—they are considered «less efficient» because they spend time away from work for child care and other tasks. Recent statistics in the West Cape region of South Africa reveal a shocking 36.9% unemployment for women and 16.6% for men.

In the deepening Asian financial crisis, full-time employment policies and rural life are deteriorating. The impact of structural adjustment on social services and rural support programmes (notably in Southeast Asia and China, Malaysia, Pakistan and the Philippines respectively)—programmes that so recently helped

¹ The author conducted this research in the course of an internship at Social Watch in 1998.

² *World Employment 1996/1997*, International Labour Office, Geneva, 1997, pp.13–46.

³ *Mapping Progress: Assessing Implementation of the Beijing Platform 1998*, Women's Environment and Development Organization, New York, 1998.

⁴ *Ibid.*

women in poverty—is not yet known, but women seem to be bearing the brunt of the crisis.⁵

North America does not boast policies of full employment, but the United States and Canada currently have low unemployment rates. More women are under-employed than men: although the majority of women say they want full-time work, two-thirds of all part-time workers and two of three temporary workers in the US are women.⁶ Women of colour and aboriginal women suffer higher unemployment rates and earn less than white women. Canadian aboriginal women have unemployment rates of 20–80%, depending on whether or not they live on reserves,⁷ compared with 9.4% unemployment for women overall.⁸

In Latin America, the lingering effects of the 1980s debt crisis and structural adjustment are high unemployment and low wage, unskilled, informal work. While support for social services and a focus on labour-intensive development have benefitted women in countries such as Chile and Costa Rica, overall, women's unemployment is higher than men's (in the Dominican Republic, the number of unemployed women is three times that of men), and labour law violations are rampant (the US labour department reported that in some Mexican factories, pregnant women were dismissed to avoid paying for maternity leave).⁹

While governments are taking positive measures to support women, these examples indicate that more is needed. Despite improved maternity leave and child care policies of some European countries, structural adjustment is hurting women. This suggests that a commitment to women's advancement requires questioning the very nature of structural adjustment. Unless women's employment is tackled simultaneously on a multitude of fronts (ie, investment in social services, small enterprise credit schemes and protection of labour laws), inequalities and consequentially, women's lower quality of life and poverty, persist.

GENDER AND LABOUR MUST ADVANCE TOGETHER

Since 1995, issues of domestic violence, reproductive rights and women's political participation have become more visible. However, there has been a persistent gap at the intersection of gender issues and employment. Social Watch 1998 states:

«Below...average [is the execution of] on-going plans in the area of "Employment". Above average, exceeding 80% of the plans in execution, are "Women and Gender Inequality" In other words, the area of "Employment" appears as an area of lesser political priority, while "Women and Gender Inequality"... appear[s] as an area of greater political priority relative to measures taken by governments and foreseen in the Copenhagen and Beijing agreements.»¹⁰

Of the 15 countries surveyed for this report, only Bolivia, Bulgaria and El Salvador developed both gender equity and employment plans since 1995 and show some level of plan implementation. Bulgaria has few mechanisms by which to implement their plan, however, and women have been among the worst hit by layoffs in the drive for privatisation.¹¹

Although 15 countries constitute a small sample, the information they yield indicates a larger trend. It should also be noted that attention to women's employment is often restricted to maternity leave, child care and credit schemes. While these are important, they are not comprehensive.

The fact that «Women and Gender Inequality» receives above-average attention from governments represents significant progress. This progress is delayed, however, if proportionately less attention is given to employment programmes and if these are not coordinated with gender equality programmes. To overlook the importance of women's status as labourers (paid or unpaid) perpetuates the devaluation of women's work and the invisibility of the woman worker, and it results in gender insensitive labour policies. It also ignores the reality that the type of work women do and the conditions under which they work are gendered. Accordingly, it is a «women's issue» that so many women are concentrated in the informal sector (as in Ghana, where many women are self-employed with no health benefits or job security). It is a «women's issue» that migrant workers have few protections (for instance, the 7.2 Filipinos working abroad of which 55% to 65% are women).¹² It is a «women's issue» that labour leaders are often attacked and that labour is one of the civil society groups least represented in policy making¹³ (it is estimated that in the US, one out of every four union activists loses his/her job because of union activism).

A commitment to women means tackling all of the issues in women's lives (from violence to work) and understanding that they cannot be completely understood or dealt with separately. For instance, violence against women will never be eradicated if

5 Constanza Moreira. «Strategies in the Struggle Against Poverty: A Comparative Approach», *Social Watch*, N° 2 (1998), pp.30–49.

6 <http://135.145.13.100/woman/wwfacts.htm>

7 *Mapping Progress*, op. cit.

8 *World Bank 1998 World Development Indicators*, p. 66.

9 *Mapping Progress*, op. cit.

10 *Social Watch 1998*, p. 16–18.

11 *Mapping Progress*, op. cit.

12 Victoria Tauli-Corpuz. «Asia–Pacific women grapple with financial crisis and globalization.» *Third World Resurgence*, N° 94, p. 15–20.

13 *Social Watch 1998*, p. 16–18.

women do not have financial stability/access to secure jobs that enable them to leave abusive relationships and support themselves.

«WOMEN'S» WORK

While increasing numbers of women are engaged in paid employment, women continue to do much of the unpaid work that is fundamental for society. This work includes everything from child care and agriculture to «helping» in a family store. It can require all of a woman's time, or it may be something she does in her «free» time—the double shift that begins when she comes home from her paid job to the unpaid work at home. According to the ILO, women in developing countries spend as much as 31–40 hours per week in unpaid labour, compared with only 5–15 hours by men.¹⁴ The unpaid work of women results both from gender roles and, importantly, from «societal needs». For instance, in a country without universal child care, someone must stay with a young child, or where minimum wage laws are not enforced, someone must grow vegetables to reduce food costs; most often, that «someone» is a woman. Where women are filling societal needs, they should be compensated for it. The impact of paying women for this labour would reverberate throughout society, with the benefits in economic growth far outweighing the initial costs.

In *Gender and Jobs: Sex Segregation in Occupations in the World*, an ILO publication by Richard Anker, some overall trends are apparent.¹⁵ Women are over-represented in the professional and technical category (typically confined to teaching and nursing), in the clerical sector, and in service occupations in all regions (most frequently as maids/housekeepers, barber/hairdressers and waitresses). Women are consistently under-represented in production occupations (which represent the largest percentage of jobs in the non-agricultural sector) and have the lowest participation rate in the Administrative/Managerial sector (usually prestigious, well-paid jobs). Women are over-represented in the sales category in the majority of OECD countries, in Africa, and in Latin America and the Caribbean; in Asia, results are mixed; and in most of the Middle East and North Africa, women are severely under-represented.

Anker's study suggests that women workers continue to be concentrated in less prestigious, smaller sector, lower income, gendered occupations than reflect persisting stereotypes about women's «natural» abilities and «feminine» characteristics. In the administrative/managerial sector, where workers must be respected and perceived as knowledgeable leaders, women are under-represented. In the service sector, where workers «do» for others, frequently at low wages, women have a long history.

This information is relevant, because it shows that three years after the Copenhagen and Beijing conferences, women still face significant occupational segregation and sex-stereotyping. A proactive gender policy would develop industries where women are concentrated and offer training and/or affirmative action programmes to tackle occupational segregation. The government of Luxembourg is one of the few to attempt affirmative action employment policies, but despite an increase in spending for women's programmes, affirmative action has been difficult to implement.¹⁶

Though women's non-agricultural work has increased in recent years, a large concentration of women (and men) continue to work in the agricultural sector. Agriculture accounts for the largest share of female employment in much of Africa and Asia, with more than 90% of the female work force in agriculture in 11 African nations.¹⁷ Though agriculture varies by region, women are more likely to work in subsistence than commercial crop production, often as part of the informal economy on rural farms. The World Bank reports that in 1994, of the women in the labour force working in agriculture, 76% were in the lowest income bracket, presumably in poverty.¹⁸

Factors that affect agricultural women's lives include lack of property rights and access to credit. Some governments have made efforts to protect and improve these since WSSD and FWCW. In Zimbabwe, the Inheritance Act of 1997 made it possible for women to inherit land. In practice, however, little has changed. In Malaysia, the 1958 Distribution Act was replaced with the 1997 Distribution (Amended) Act, which makes property inheritance gender neutral. While women in agriculture have in some cases gained access to property and credit rights, the export orientation of macroeconomic policies often contradicts these advancements for women in agriculture and in other fields.¹⁹

¹⁴ <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/235press/pr/96-25.htm>.

¹⁵ «Representation ratio is defined, in a relative sense, as the percentage of females in the major occupational group divided by the average percentage of females for the non-agricultural labour force as a whole. A ratio of 1.00 indicates an employment share equal to women's share of non-agricultural employment as a whole. Women can, therefore be said to be over-represented (compared with their share of the total non-agricultural labour force) when the representation ratio is above 1.00, and under-represented when it is below 1.00» (Anker p.162). See Richard Anker, 1998, *Gender and Jobs: Sex Segregation of Occupations in the World*, International Labour Office, Geneva, pp.138–168 for a more in-depth analysis of the categories and variation from country to country.

¹⁶ *Mapping Progress, op. cit.*

¹⁷ *World Bank 1998 World Development Indicators*, pp.58–60.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 60.

¹⁹ *Mapping Progress, op. cit.*

STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT AND FREE TRADE

Primary obstacles to implementation of WSSD and FWCW commitments is the macroeconomic policies of structural adjustment and free trade. Though some countries adopt structural adjustment on their own, it is most often initiated at the behest of multilateral lending institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) as a condition for aid. The prescribed formula, supposedly to correct the conditions that necessitated the aid, is consistent with the aims of capitalism: free markets, smaller government, and open doors to foreign investors.

Structural adjustment and free trade policies mean that, whether or not governments want to implement their WSSD and FWCW commitments, they do not operate solely as autonomous entities free to choose. In practice, structural adjustment and free trade hinder implementation of commitments and create new problems. «Progress» is measured by countries' standing in world markets, not by poverty rates or income disparities (both of which increase under structural adjustment). As governments are encouraged to open their doors to foreign investors, they sacrifice domestic labour standards and remove protections and support for domestic industries, as has happened in India.²⁰ When government is down-sized, social services that women rely on are reduced, and jobs in the public sector are cut, usually good jobs where women are concentrated, as happened in Egypt.²¹

Evidence suggests that, even apart from these international commitments, structural adjustment strategies don't work and often worsen a country's condition. The World Bank and the IMF have been in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Republic of Korea since the beginning of the Asian financial crisis, and despite their coordinated efforts with governments, the crisis has deepened and had profound spillover effects.²² Until we fully recognise the failures of multilateral organisations and free trade policies and develop a system of accountability, we must continue to deal with the very real impact structural adjustment is having on people's lives.

The superficial definition of the bottom line within the framework of structural adjustment results in the deterioration of women and poor people's lives. Women, as a majority among the poor, are in a doubly dangerous position. «Because... the overriding concern in... economic reform is balancing budgets and liberalising markets to promote growth, policy-makers are not seriously concerned with gender imbalances in access to and control over resources.»²³

Although these issues are difficult to measure, existing evidence suggests that these macroeconomic policies are particularly bad for women workers. For instance, structural adjustment and free trade result in:

- greater numbers of women looking for paid work (studies have documented women's labour force participation increasing in Argentina, Brazil, the Caribbean, Chile, Costa Rica, Peru, Philippines, Turkey and Uruguay);
- growth in wage differentials between men and women (as happened in Egypt and Sri Lanka);
- more women than men unemployed (within three years of structural adjustment, Turkish women went from being one quarter of all discouraged workers to two-thirds; in Brazil, more than one million people—two-thirds of them women—have lost their jobs since the 1996 structural adjustments);
- more women working in the informal sector (as formal sector opportunities decrease);
- deteriorated working conditions (weakened labour laws destroy on-the-job health, safety and organising protections, as in the maquilas of Honduras);
- an increase in women's unpaid work (more time is needed to compensate for higher prices of basic necessities);
- increased poverty among women (for all of the above reasons).²⁴

WOMEN IN THE ASIAN FINANCIAL CRISIS

Twenty-five countries in Asia and the Pacific developed post-Beijing country plans, and according to Social Watch 1998, at least 12 seemed likely to reach WSSD goals by the target year 2000.

While many Asian governments showed interest in women's employment following the Beijing and Copenhagen conferences, women workers in the crisis countries are the first to lose their jobs. Lai Dilokvidhayarat named two factors that put women at greater risk of being fired than men. «First, women have always had less chance to make progress in the workplace. Second, women are viewed as less deserving of a firm's investments or training experience because of the traditional expectation that their energies are divided with household work.»²⁵

The advent of new labour legislation which makes it easier to lay off workers is expected to increase the number of unemployed,

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Pamela Sparr. 1994. *Mortgaging Women's Lives: Feminist Critiques of Structural Adjustment*. Zed Books Ltd, London.

²² Editor's note: Indeed, some observers suggest that World Bank and IMF policies of structural adjustment and free trade are at least in part responsible for the Asian financial crisis.

²³ Yassine Fall. «Promoting Sustainable Human Development Rights for Women in Africa.» *Third World Resurgence*, N° 94, pp.23–29.

²⁴ Pamela Sparr. pp.20–29.

²⁵ Prangtip Daorueng and Kafil Yamin. «Women: Last In, First Out», *Third World Resurgence*, N° 94, pp. 21–22.

with women workers the first to go. A Korean job seeker survey suggests that once women lose their jobs, they find it harder to replace them: there are twice as many women job seekers as male job seekers in the Republic of Korea. The fragility of newly created export industry jobs is increasingly apparent. The majority of companies retrenching workers in Indonesia are in the export sector, for instance the textile industry, where the majority of workers are women. These problems are compounded by the fact that most major Asian economies do not have unemployment insurance and have yet to initiate substantial support networks. The informal economy is growing, but it remains outside most labour laws.²⁶

As mentioned before, the majority of Asian women are small-scale farmers. Governments are pushing for a transition from subsistence agriculture to cash crops. One way they do this is to decrease support for small-scale farmers and increase support for large-scale farmers with export-oriented crops (contrary to post-Beijing commitments they made to small-scale farmers and women's credit opportunities). In the Philippines, more than 120 thousand hectares of agricultural lands, forests and rural communities are being transformed to attract foreign investment. In one such project, Calabarzon, peasant women and their families were displaced from the land.

The breakdown of rural agriculture has resulted in food insecurity and out-migration in most Asian countries affected by the crisis. Many women who lose their land have to work on the farms of others. When they do not earn enough, they take on second jobs and/or relocate to urban centers and Free Trade Zones where they work as domestic helpers and in restaurants, nightclubs, and karaoke bars (which often serve as fronts for prostitution). The Karen Women's Organisation (Myanmar) estimates 40 thousand indigenous women from Myanmar are currently working as prostitutes in Thailand. The incidence of HIV infections among these women is very high.²⁷

Thus, when talking about social development and gender equality goals, the World Bank and the IMF must also sit at the table and make commitments. Their current practices undermine potential improvements in government policy and exacerbate existing inequalities. Women's issues have increased in visibility at the World Bank, for instance Gender Action Plans have been launched for each region. Unfortunately, the Bank lacks a clear

framework for integrating gender equality into its policies, its integration of gender analysis has been slow, there are no accountability mechanisms for making policies gender sensitive, the Bank lacks a thorough process of self-criticism to review these issues, and structural adjustment has not been rethought to eliminate the harmful effects on women.²⁸ As one attendee remarked at the First Conference of the Peoples' Global Action Against Free Trade and the World Trade Organisation, «Globalisation is not something that has dropped from heaven. It is not inevitable: it is made by human beings taking decisions in rich countries. We can change those rules—in the WTO, in the World Bank, and in the IMF.» Let's make those changes happen soon.²⁹

CONCLUSION

Three years after the WSSD and FWCW, women's rights are receiving more attention from governments than before. However, women's work, which is crucial to women and to society as a whole, is not being given adequate priority as a multifaceted issue integrated into all governmental policy. The consequence is persisting inequalities between men and women. With a variety of pressures on governments, in particular structural adjustment programmes, these problems are understandable but not acceptable. To overlook women and their work contradicts the very goal of WSSD: the eradication of poverty. As a result, the feminisation of poverty is on the rise, and based on current trends, this seems unlikely to stop anytime soon.

This does not have to be so. As in Iran, governments can offset structural adjustment with increased cooperatives and support for workers in the public sector. As in Lithuania, governments can offer housing support and affirmative action for women in retraining programs.³⁰ Women do not advance when governments fail to take a comprehensive approach to their needs—when macroeconomic policy is prioritised above social spending, labour laws, union rights, job training, and economic sectors where women are concentrated. The quality of life and rights of women workers can be advanced, but governments and international bodies must work harder to make it happen sooner, because people struggling cannot wait forever. ●

²⁶ See Victoria Tauli-Corpuz in *Third World Resurgence*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ «Gender Equity and the World Bank Group: A Post-Beijing Assessment», Women's Eyes on the World Bank (US), 1997.

²⁹ John Madeley, «Globalisation Under Attack... Or Not?», *Third World Network Features*—first appeared as a Panos Feature (30 April 1998).

³⁰ *Mapping Progress*, *op. cit.*