Chapter 3 - Imperialism and women's oppression

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It wrecked subsistence agriculture, brought ruin to domestic textile industries, destroyed the systems of obligation and support in peasant villages and undermined feudal and religious authority. But where capitalism beats down Chinese walls? it also tears apart the social fabric of the old societies, including the family structures, not in order to further progress, but to facilitate the colonial enslavement of the peoples it has conquered.

For women, as for the toiling masses as a whole, these developments created the material conditions for liberation from the often brutal patriarchal family structures that prevailed before the arrival of imperialist capital, yet at the same time deepened and sharpened the exploitation and oppression that they suffered. The introduction of capitalist industry, the invasion of the countryside by capitalism, the loosening of feudal ties, lead to the creation of the working class, the one class capable of ending exploitation, oppression and class society altogether. In the imperialist epoch the road has been opened to the mass of peasant and working women of the colonies and semi-colonies. Subordination to the male head of the family, superstition, ignorance and enslavement—the norms of family life for centuries—can be abolished once and for all.

Yet, precisely because we are in the epoch of imperialism the potential for such progress is blocked and indeed prevented altogether in some countries, areas and sectors, by imperialism’s reactionary stranglehold. Combined and uneven development has created the material pre-requisites for, and the obstacles to, the liberation of women in the imperialised world. But only revolutions led by the working class and directed towards the destruction of capitalism altogether can utilise those pre-requisites and destroy those obstacles.

The role of women in production and reproduction is affected by imperialist exploitation. Proletarianisation can mean an endless hell of migrant or landless labouring, or unemployment and a shanty town home for millions of women. For women in the more developed semi-colonies, like South Korea, it can mean super-exploitation while young followed by destitution once your capacity to work has been drained from you as a result of years (often starting when you are aged ten) of long hours and miserable pay. And for millions of other women this process leads inexorably towards prostitution (a vast industry in places like Thailand) or to being exported as a servant/wife (in fact slave) of men in the west (the Philippino brides for sale and the export of young women from Sri Lanka are both sickening examples of this trade in women).

Peasant women are left with a double burden of caring for the household and working the land. Where land is seized or where class differentiation in the countryside leaves the poorest without land, women can be left to fend for the family with no means of support except the hope that some wages will be sent home from a husband working in the city. Marriages and traditional family structures are destroyed or re-created in forms that intensify the oppression suffered by women. And proletarian women who escape the countryside often find their incomes drained anyway by the need to support the landless family they have left behind. Most often though, women drawn into production work for lower rates of pay than men and are...
often confined to seasonal work. All of this increases the risk of prostitution or submission into actual slavery becoming the only alternatives to starvation.

For those women who remain in the countryside, especially in Africa, the introduction of modern agriculture, and especially cash crops, has led to women losing control of (matrilineally inherited) land and food production, despite the fact that they still do most of the work. The compulsion to continue working in these adverse conditions is the necessity of producing the means of subsistence for young and old dependents. Previous forms of women’s oppression—dowry, bride price, female circumcision, polygamy—are not eradicated by imperialism although their social basis may be undermined. Millions of women, particularly in Africa and in some Islamic countries, suffer clitiderectomy or infibulation. Tens of thousands in southern Asia bear the burden of toil in the husband’s family household.

The partial destruction of the traditional family structures and obligations can leave women less protected, leading, for example, to such horror as an increase in bride burning in India. And the advances capitalism does bring, such as education and health, really benefit only a small handful of people in the imperialised world. Women’s literacy is still below men’s. And, despite medical advances, the mass of women in the semi-colonies have no control over their own fertility at all. In Africa and Asia half a million women die every year in childbirth.

Given these conditions of oppression it is no wonder that women have joined, in their thousands, the struggles against imperialism in the colonies and semi-colonies.

In Vietnam, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Angola and Mozambique women have taken up arms in courageous struggles against the heavily armed imperialist or imperialist backed regimes. Yet time and again the interests of the working class and peasant women have been betrayed by either the petit bourgeois nationalist leaderships who, in power, have been driven to seek a new accord with imperialism, or by the Stalinist leaders whose bureaucratic rule reproduces many of the worst features of capitalist family life.

In some cases, such as Iran, the traditionally subservient role played by women meant that after the revolution against the Shah they were subjected to a fearful counter-revolution at the hands of the mullahs. In other cases women have made real gains, especially in terms of literacy, health care and, sometimes, even democratic rights. However, without the overthrow of capitalism or of the Stalinist rulers of the degenerate workers’ states that have emerged from anti-imperialist struggles, all gains made by women will prove temporary, checked, eliminated or made meaningless by continued imperialist exploitation, the demands of the IMF or the needs of the parasitic bureaucracy presiding over the planned economies.

The willingness of the PDPA in Afghanistan to sacrifice the women’s literacy programme as part of its deal with the reactionary Islamic rebels, is but the latest example of the treachery to the cause of women’s liberation that Stalinism is capable of. Petit bourgeois nationalism has and will again betray in exactly the same fashion. Only the programme of permanent revolution, in which the achievement of meaningful democratic rights and of a progressive solution to the agrarian question are inseparably linked to the achievement of working class power and socialism, can bring to women the prospect of a successful end to their struggle against oppression.

A feature of the early colonial period was the wholesale forced removal and enslavement of west Africans by European traders and plantation owners in the Americas. Families and communities were literally torn apart. Both the labour power and reproductive capacity were strictly controlled and exploited by the slaveholders. Enslaved women were denied all freedom of choice in sexual and personal relations and, as the property of the owners, systematically raped and abused by them. Enslaved women were almost entirely responsible for the rearing of their children but had no control over their future.
Not surprisingly, black women were at the forefront of the battle against slavery in the US. Slavery has left its mark on the societies it affected. In particular, it contributed to the growth of racism and thus to the triple burden of oppression suffered by black women of the working class in the Americas and in Europe. The indentured labour system did not produce such extremes of subordination and oppression but it too imposed extra burdens on women who were left responsible for the family without support, when male labour was required by the imperialists.

In the twentieth century, the devastating effect of imperialism on the economies and semi-colonies has created global migrant labour. Women in this group suffer specific forms of discrimination and a terrible weight of oppression in the "host" countries. Institutionalised racism and general manifestations of racism in the form of national chauvinism, prevents most of these women from benefiting from some of the gains that women in the imperialist heartlands have won within the context of bourgeois democracy. Racism in most cases forces these women to retreat back into the migrant communities.

Wherever, for cultural or religious reasons, patriarchal ideology dominates these communities women may then face extra obstacles that prevent them from claiming their full democratic rights, from participating in the labour movement and from struggling against their own oppression. They are therefore unable to take up issues of women's oppression within the working class organisations as a whole. Immigration controls guarantee a subordinate position for immigrant women since they are termed as dependents of men within the context of marriage. The weight of this oppression and subordination also make it doubly difficult for these women to fight oppression within their own communities and families.

Another effect of immigration controls in imperialist countries is that it keeps thousands of women separated from their partners and therefore neither the country of origin, nor the country where the male is employed accepts responsibility for their welfare. The weight of oppression, combined with racism within the labour movement and the failure of existing women's movements to fight consistently for the interests of black women, create conditions for growing support for strategies proposed by separatists and black nationalists. These propose the separation of black women's struggles from those of all black workers and the class as a whole. But black women have time and again taken the lead in struggles for unionisation, welfare rights and against racism. This shows the potential for black and other migrant women to fight for a class solution to their own specific oppression.

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