

The pandemic and the double burden for women

Jaqueline Katharina Singh Fri, 12/03/2021 - 00:00

Jaqueline Katharina Singh

For more than a year, the pandemic has been turning our lives upside down. As of February, around 110 million people across the globe have officially contracted the COVID19 virus, and nearly 2.5 million have died. Lockdowns, face masks, unemployment - the list of things that are now part of our everyday lives is long. Fear for friends, family and one's own existence is a daily experience for the many - the latter is especially true for many working people.

The pandemic has triggered and massively aggravated an economic crisis that was already looming. Among other things, this was because almost all countries were hit at the same time (unlike the financial crisis of 2007/08). In a report, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) states that the pandemic has wiped out all progress in the fight against global poverty since the 1990s. Social inequality has dramatically worsened in 2020. This means that those who were already living at the subsistence level will own even less, but also that minor improvements that have been won in recent years are already disappearing.

The crisis is called capitalism

As a result of the financial crisis of 2007/08, we have seen a steady intensification of imperialist conflicts in recent years, whether through interventions in Ukraine and Syria, the constant threats against Iran or the trade war between the US and China. The latter in particular represents a more direct confrontation between two imperialist powers, which is not just about a mere trial of strength. Rather, it is the culmination of the question of which power will reshape the world market in its interest - the declining USA, which has dominated for decades, or China, as a new rising power. The current crisis will likewise intensify struggles over distribution and the great game between global powers. The question of the availability of medical supplies, especially vaccines, is itself a mirror for the underlying struggle for the redivision of the world. A cursory glance at the situation shows that first, all imperialist powers have secured privileged access to vaccines and effectively cleared the market. In addition, the big corporations, almost exclusively based in the capitalist centres, sensing enormous monopoly profits for years, have insisted on patent rights and, thus, the exclusion of billions of people from affordable access to the vaccines. While the population of the imperialist states can be vaccinated by the end of 2021, in many countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia, even optimistic predictions say that only 20% will receive vaccination by then.

The dramatically growing global debt further exacerbates inequality. While the USA, China or even the EU can mitigate the immediate effects of the crisis in the short term by spending billions of dollars, yuan or euros, and launching economic programmes, this path is closed to most countries of the Global South. At best, they can hope for a short-term suspension of debt service on loans arranged through the IMF or other creditors. This burden will make them even more dependent on the centres of the world economy and finance capital. The consequences for billions of wage earners, peasants and farmers are extreme. To sum up, even if the imperialist centres try to return to normalcy through vaccination, the situation will not ease on its own. While the national governments are putting together rescue packages for big corporations, they will try to pass on the costs incurred to the working class. This means mass layoffs and cuts in social services always accompanied by the constant threat of mutations of the virus that are

resistant to the vaccine. So, the question, which different individual capitals are already answering on their own behalf, is, who pays for the costs of the crisis and the consequences of the pandemic?

While the power struggle among sections of capital is still going on, at the same time it is clear that, globally, they will all try to shift the costs onto the working class. In the following, we will give an overview of how the burden on working-class women has increased since the outbreak of the pandemic, what problems they are facing more acutely, and then look at the causes of oppression and the question of struggle against it. After all, they are a significant part of the working class and face specific attacks due to their social oppression. Women are overrepresented in many of the industries most affected by Covid-19, such as catering, retail and entertainment. For example, 40% of all employed women, 510 million worldwide, work in the most affected industries, compared to 36.6% of employed men. Internationally, women make up 70% of the workforce in social and care occupations.

Short-time work and layoffs

The first major waves of lay-offs mainly affected sectors where women are overrepresented, such as retail, hospitality and tourism. A statistical survey from the USA shows that women are more affected by job loss than men in various sectors. In leisure and hospitality, 52% of workers were women before the pandemic, but 54% of those laid off are female. In education and health, women made up 77% of the workforce, but 83% of those laid off. In retail, 48% of workers were women and 61% of job losses hit women. In local and state government, 58% of the workforce was female but they accounted for 63% of the lay-offs.

According to ILO figures, 61% of the global workforce, around 2 billion people, earned their livelihoods in the informal economy in 2018, of which around 50% are women. For these people, this means that they have no enforceable employment contract, unemployment insurance or comparable protection.

While women make up half of the people in the informal sector, they are overrepresented in the Global South. In South Asia, for example, over 80% of all women working outside agriculture are employed in the informal sector, 74% in sub-Saharan Africa and 54% in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Migrant workers are often particularly affected by the crisis. In India, for example, at least 40 million migrant workers have lost their jobs and accommodation overnight. They had to travel hundreds of kilometres back to their families, to whom they usually send money themselves. It is estimated that 660,000 to 1.5 million migrants were housed in camps where they received minimal food rations.

However, women are not only affected as over-exploited wage workers. In many countries of the semi-colonial world, they were often also recipients of 'micro-credits' as part of so-called development aid. In Jordan, for example, around 70% of women received such loans. Under the conditions of the pandemic and the crisis, many can no longer pay their instalments, are unable to pay, which in some countries can be punished with imprisonment.

We can see from these examples that working women are hit the hardest economically by the crisis. Even if the medical crisis should be resolved over the course of 2022, the incurred economic and subsequent social hardships will not.

Women's health: Not a priority?

Because of the pandemic, the focus of many health systems lies on fighting the virus. This makes sense in itself. However, since there was already a shortage of medical staff and facilities, it means that these have been made worse in other aspects of healthcare. For example, we are currently seeing an increase in maternal and child mortality in many countries.

Access to hygiene products and contraceptives is hampered by loss of earnings, and their production is partly suspended. In India, during the first weeks of the lock-down, sanitary pads were not considered essential. Girls from poor families had no access due to the closure of schools. NGOs and aid agencies estimate that in India alone, at least 121 million women were unable to access goods to meet their basic needs, with rural areas and small towns particularly affected. In addition, the already limited access to abortion is further restricted. According to UN estimates, the Covid19 crisis could lead to 7 million

unwanted pregnancies. On the one hand, because access to contraceptives is more difficult, on the other hand, because sexualised violence against women has massively increased and they are even more tied to the family and thus to husbands. Where abortions are legal, access to counselling has been massively reduced, with many surgeries and family planning centres reducing their services. In eight US states, court cases were ongoing during the first lockdown as abortions were placed on the list of 'non-emergency' medical treatments.

Violence against women

At the same time, the situation of women in families and relationships is worsening. The United Nations Population Fund estimates 31 million additional cases of domestic violence in six months of the lockdown. We are dealing with a global, not a regional, problem.

In France, domestic violence cases increased by 30% with the curfews of 2020. The French government also announced that up to 20,000 rooms in hotels would be reserved for victims, and 20 counselling centres were set up in French shopping centres.

In the first two weeks of April 2020 alone, there was a 47% increase in calls to the Spanish domestic violence hotline compared to the same period last year. The number of women who contacted the support services by email or via social media, which the government considers essential, is said to have increased by up to 700%.

The extent of the problem becomes visible when looking at the existing infrastructure for women affected by violence. In Germany, for example, there has been a lack of space in women's shelters for years. To date, around 6,800 places are available, although Germany already committed to creating at least 21,400 in 2017. In the short term, this could have been remedied by using vacant living space, hotels and holiday flats that were not occupied due to the pandemic, but nothing was done. In addition, social isolation and quarantine make the situation of women more difficult. When locked up with your perpetrators, you can't just disappear and take care of the children who are exposed to blatant violence, too.

Working from home and unpaid housework

Basically, women still do far more unpaid domestic work than men. In the wake of Corona, schools and kindergartens have been closed, care support in the home has often been eliminated or reduced.

In addition, working from home and childcare are difficult to reconcile. This is shown in Germany by the fact that 40% of those with children under the age of 14 consider working at home extremely or very stressful compared to 28% of those without children. As many as 1.5 million single parents, 90% of whom are women, are even more affected.

A vicious cycle

Many women work in the care sector and in so-called essential professions. They are often exposed to a higher risk of infection, but at the same time they are the most affected by dismissals. This ties them more economically to the family, making them more vulnerable to domestic violence. In addition, the reproductive work that has to be done in the household increases, which increases the double burden on women. So, under conditions of capitalist crisis, which is reinforced by the pandemic, they are pushed more into the classic reactionary gender role. Even if contact bans are now relaxed, there will be no return to the already dubious 'normality'. Rather, the economic crisis threatens more dismissals and massive social cuts.

In order to change the current situation, it is essential to understand why the pandemic and economic crisis increase women's oppression. Where does this oppression come from? There are numerous theoretical approaches and various solutions from different feminist movements, which we cannot go into here.

Instead, we will deal with the position of revolutionaries.

Women's oppression existed long before capitalism and took a systematic form in all class societies. For example, in feudalism, the peasant family was the unit of production and reproduction. What is typical of capitalism, however, is that the function of the household and family for the oppressed class changes in

comparison to earlier class societies. In capitalism, production and reproduction are separated and of course the family/partnership also has a different function for the working class and for the owning classes. For the former, it serves primarily to reproduce the commodity of labour power, while for capitalists it is essential for the inheritance of the means of production.

Even if this 'ideal' of the working class family, seen globally, often does not correspond to reality at all, capitalism takes over a pre-existing gender-specific division of labour, which is itself reinforced and reproduced by the fact that the man's wage is set as the family wage, while the woman only 'earns extra'. The bourgeois family, which is also ideologically and repressively enforced as the norm in the working class against other forms, reproduces the gendered division of labour and this in turn solidifies the family as an apparently natural form of living together.

Why women are hit harder

This form of gendered division of labour also means that women are often particularly affected by crises. It is precisely in such periods that reproductive work is systematically pushed into the private sphere under capitalism. The costs of raising children and caring for the sick and elderly, especially in the public sector, appear as useless, unproductive labour, since they often do not create surplus value for capital. This does not mean that they are not useful work. But since they cannot be valorised on the same scale as other, say, industrial work, care work in a public hospital or the work of a governess in a day-care centre, they only appear as a cost factor that should be reduced or saved altogether.

This is why individual child-rearing and care of the elderly remain in the family, and it is primarily women who bring up and care for them. This operation can be quite contradictory, because under certain conditions social capital as a whole actually needs more female labour, which explains a partial socialisation of domestic work, for example, through the creation of kindergartens, canteens and so on. In times of crisis, however, costs have to be saved by lowering wages, extending working hours, short-time work and layoffs, but also, and above all, by cuts in the social sector as a whole. Women thus still function as flexible top-up workers, a particularly easily disposable part of the industrial reserve army. During crises, they are pushed into the private sphere first, taking care of the family. But when the economy improves, they can again be employed easily and with potentially lower pay.

We also see here where the gender pay gap comes from. The man's wage is historically set as the family wage (which also includes the costs of reproducing the family). The woman's work thereby appears only as a 'supplement' or 'top-up'. The entire situation forms a cycle of misery that reproduces itself to a certain extent. Based on the gendered division of labour, the man goes to work because he earns more - and because the man earns more, the woman stays at home. Thus, the gender division of labour reproduces itself at the same time.

Struggles of the workers' and women's movements have won important improvements, but real equality could never be achieved because the different wages are rooted in the gender-specific division of labour and in the private character of domestic work. Especially in crises, we are always faced with the danger of a rollback.

What we fight for!

Even though the living and working conditions of women in different countries and regions are very different, there are some common points of demand that are of great importance for an international movement.

Health

protection for all!

Free access for all, especially women from the Global South, to healthcare and Covid-19 vaccines and tests. The production and distribution of vaccines must be taken out of the control of private corporations. No to the vaccine nationalism of the imperialist states, abolish patent laws and establish an international plan for rapid production and distribution. Cancel the debts of the semi-colonial countries and finance

healthcare, quarantine care and protective measures for the population through an internationally coordinated plan, financed by the rich countries and by taxing wealth and capital!

Equal work, equal pay!

This includes demands for a minimum wage or the abolition of all forms of informal, precarious work through collectively agreed wages and salaries, linked to the control of these measures by committees of the working class, especially female wage workers. No layoffs, and full pay for all workers during lockdowns with closure of all non-essential sectors of the economy. Increase pensions, unemployment benefits to at least the level of the minimum wage. Control of trade unions and workers' committees over these measures.

Self-determination over one's own body!

This must include the right to contraception, and free, safe and accessible abortion. It also includes protection from domestic violence, divorce rights, legal equality, the massive expansion of shelters such as women's shelters, and the development of self-defence committees against violence and assault, supported by the workers' movement.

Struggle

against dismissals,
inclusion in working life!

The struggle against dismissals must also be directed against those of women. All legal disadvantages, all forms of sexism and discrimination in working life must be fought rigorously. The struggle against dismissals must be linked to that for a massive reduction of working hours so that work can be shared among all, men and women alike.

socialisation of domestic work!

Instead of further cuts, we must advocate the expansion of schools, educational institutions, public hospitals and cultural institutions under working-class control. This is absolutely necessary to counter a further rollback and increase in private domestic work. Ultimately, the task is to socialise all domestic work so that vital tasks such as bringing up children and caring for the old and sick no longer remain an individual burden on women but are taken care of collectively.

Against sexism and chauvinism!

In building an international movement against the health, social and economic crisis, women and their demands must play a key role. But their oppression in society all too often finds its continuation in the reformist and bureaucratised workers' movement. Therefore, it is necessary that they can also defend themselves in an organised way against all forms of sexism and chauvinism in our class and have the right to their own meetings like all other socially oppressed people in parties or trade unions. With the Women's Strikes of the last few years, a global force has begun to form that has the potential to become an international proletarian women's movement. This is not an obstacle for the common struggle of men and women of the working class but rather a precondition for a real, common struggle against women's oppression and capitalism.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/pandemic-and-double-burden-women>