

From reserve army to frontline troops: women in the global workforce

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When the early socialist campaigners talked about women's liberation they saw the right to work, access to an independent wage and integration into the collectivity of the workplace as key steps to freedom from subservience and family drudgery. Today, more women do paid labour than ever before: but what does that mean for women's liberation?

A feature of capitalist development in the last part of the 20th Century has been the sustained rise in the female workforce: women now account for 36% of the world's paid labour force. Since the 1970s, women's rates of 'economic activity' - work measurable in capitalist terms - have risen worldwide. The only areas to buck the trend have been parts of sub-Saharan Africa and some countries experiencing the restoration of capitalism. In parts of Europe and North America, women now make up between 40% and 50% of the paid workforce.

Much of this expansion has been in service industries. While heavy industry and extraction jobs have declined, service industries have expanded.

A substantial proportion of the new jobs are also part-time and temporary - for instance both in Australia and the UK close to half of the female workforce is working part-time. Of Europe's entire part-time workforce, women, according to Patricia O'Donovan of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions, constitute a staggering 82% of the total. The concentration in service industries, however, is not universal.

In countries marked by rapid economic development in the 1970s and 1980s, such as those in South East Asia, young women have been drawn into manufacturing. This is also true of other areas where there are Export Processing Zones such as Central America. The reasons for the sustained rise in the female workforce are varied and the subject of considerable debate. Overall, they reflect both the impact of international capitalist restructuring and changes in the family and domestic labour.

These 'pull' and 'push' factors are interrelated. For instance, in western Europe, Australia and North America, the availability of contraception, the existence of state welfare provision and the reduction of the costs of reproducing the workforce - through cheaper ready-made consumer goods and food - have made it easier for women to look for work.

At the same time employers have taken advantage of women's second class status and role within the family to use women workers as a cheap labour force. This is a different pattern from that of the mid-20th Century when women workers were pulled into and then expelled from production, most notably during two world wars but also in synchronisation with the economic cycle (see Trotskyist International 13/14).

The OECD now reports that 'the fluctuation of women's economic activity rates according to the economic cycle is now barely visible'. Today the bulk of places in the 'reserve army of labour' are

increasingly filled by the youth in the metropolitan countries, although in some semi-colonial countries women are still the "first in and last out". Women are also an important component of the migrant labour force, frequently as domestic servants. The rise in the number of women workers has both underpinned and been affected by a substantial change in women's social status, especially in the imperialist countries.

This has been the result of gains made by the women's movement, women's increasing participation in social and political life, and their greater access to education. Yet at the same time women continue to be paid less than men, to have less access to household income and to work longer hours if all kinds of work are included. For millions of women worldwide increased access to the labour market has been combined with continued disadvantage and inequality, leading the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to conclude that "the great majority of women are simply swelling the ranks of the working poor". Women tend to work in different kind of jobs and the entry of more women into the workforce has not altered the degree of labour force segregation.

They also tend to be restricted to the less well-paid jobs within any sector. The average pay gap is between 30% and 40%. And although this gap has been narrowing it has not done so universally or consistently and, indeed, has increased marginally in Japan in the last two decades. It has also increased in the ex-Stalinist states during the period of capitalist restoration (see below).

Last but not least, it has not entirely eliminated employment discrimination. The EU's latest unemployment figures reveal that unemployment among women workers is 12.2% compared with 8.9% for men, with young women being particularly hard hit. Overall, if domestic labour is included along with other forms of work, then women work longer hours than men everywhere except in North America and Australia. The "double shift" is a worldwide pattern.

In this article we look at two aspects of these developments: first, to examine some of the debates thrown up around the question of women and the "flexible" workforce, particularly in Britain and the USA; secondly, to consider the extent of the the expansion of the female workforce on an international level and the implications this has both for women and for the working class movement as a whole.

Feminists fall out

In Trotskyist International 13/14 we highlighted the contradiction for capitalism posed by the increased employment of women. Capitalism needs women's cheap paid labour at work but it also needs women to continue to carry out unpaid labour at home. This problem will become more acute in the imperialist countries as governments try to slash welfare provision in order to shore up profit rates. Bitter debates have broken out between those who are aghast at the social consequences of the changes in the labour force and those who want to see an ever more flexible workforce.

Feminists in Britain were dismayed when Labour minister Harriet Harman justified an attack on benefits for single mothers with the language of women's emancipation. Work is liberating - so we'll cut your benefit to make sure you get a job, was Harman's message. Linked to this public furore is a debate among various feminist and academic commentators seeking explanations for the rise in the female workforce and the continued disadvantages women experience at work. One group of theories is effectively "gender blind" - or at least it deliberately ignores the realities of women's oppression. Neo-liberal economists and those embracing the ideas of the "new household economics" describe an ideal type of household where the family as a whole makes rational decisions about whether and which family members should enter the paid labour force. So if men can earn more, women will stay at home involved with childcare or other domestic tasks that otherwise the family would have to pay for.

This division of labour is a 'more efficient' use of the household's resources. It is true that such factors do influence family decisions, but the theory doesn't tell us anything about why women earn less, nor does it examine the impact of oppressive relations within the household that may affect decisions - nor how these may vary between societies. The ideal type of household ignores differing pressures of state, religion and culture. For instance, in some areas which have experienced recent industrial expansion, such as East Asia, the massive growth in the female workforce was largely made up at first of young single women.

Married women with children still leave the workforce for considerable periods. In other parts of the world, for instance in the Caribbean, women with children have a higher rate of employment in paid work. Such patterns reflect family pressures, childcare availability and also the deliberate policy of employers. Employers may positively choose women workers. They often give nonsensical explanations for this such as women's 'nimble fingers' to hide the real reason: that women's continuing subordinate position and role in the family make their labour cheaper.

Sometimes the employers are better served by young women who do not need maternity rights. In other cases women's dual role at home and at work is the best guarantee that they will comply with the 'flexible' hours and practices that accompany low pay. Sometimes state sponsored family policies have worked against women's employment. In Ireland, it took longer for the impact of industrial growth and export led development to affect women's employment. Church and state policies disadvantaged women workers. Even now, just half of Irish women are in paid employment. The neo-liberal theorists don't worry either about discrimination and segregation in the labour force. This is simply 'how it is'.

It is the market that dictates that 60% of women workers are to be found in just ten out of 80 occupational groups in OECD countries - largely clerical, sales, caring and teaching. Market forces dictate that women's hourly earnings in the UK are around 70% of men's, according to this theory. And it all happens because of the 'rational choices' of individual families. While these extreme neo-liberals would be happy to let the market follow its own course, most governments and international bodies, such as the OECD, UN and ILO, advance various types of reform programmes to correct these imbalances. The reformist perspective of mainstream modern feminism provides the justification for these policies.

"Human capital' theorists open the possibility of intervention to improve women's status in the workforce. This means positive action policies, education and increased childcare. If women had the skills and education to improve their 'capital' then they would improve their chances of better paid and more secure jobs. Many of the measures suggested are vital and progressive reforms - the ILO estimates that every added year of schooling raises women's earning power by 15% - but in the hands of the bosses, their governments and their international institutions these reforms are directed towards maximising profits.

A telling example is the advice drawn up by the Women's Department of the World Bank for countries in the transition from Stalinism to capitalism. This combines neo-liberal ideas for encouraging flexibility - removing protective legislation - with intervention where necessary to maintain and extend work-based childcare. Capitalism can certainly carry out reforms but not the thoroughgoing changes necessary to eradicate women's oppression.

Women's unpaid labour in the home is still needed and women's cheap paid labour is vital to employers. For another section of commentators, the decline of the male breadwinner and rise of the working mother has brought the spectre of social breakdown. Such arguments are traditionally associated with the religious right or sections of the British Tory party, but these forces are so enamoured of unfettered capitalist expansion and profitability that many have been silenced.

The defence of the traditional family has passed to new moralists such as, in Britain, Melanie Philips and

Patricia Morgan. Morgan argues that "men's diminishing ability to provide for their families has contributed to the high number of casual unions and fatherless children on both sides of the Atlantic". Fulminating against both left and right for promoting women's employment, Morgan argues that society should value unpaid labour in the home more instead of inviting the "destruction of the social fabric".

These arguments do relate to a genuine increase in human misery. Divorce rates have spiralled in Europe and North America. Insecurity at work means insecurity in the home. Balancing work with childcare is simply not the rational choice implied by the neo-liberals but a never-ending nightmare inflicting hardship on working mothers and condemning their children to inadequate childcare facilities. But the real responsibility for such problems are not caused by the increase in women's employment per se.

Rather, it stems from the increasingly deregulated and always unplanned capitalist economy. Morgan's solution, of turning back the clock to a golden age of patriarchy in the family home, is reactionary. Such families may be more economically stable but they are also a prison house for women and children. At best, women existed in a state of dependence, at worst, they were trapped in miserable, loveless and violent relationships. Not only is the restoration of the "traditional family" a reactionary aim it is also a complete anachronism. Capitalism's ruthless competition and drive for profits means it needs women's labour. It also needs the family and women's unpaid work at home.

How can it square the circle? On cue enters Catherine Hakim, an academic apologist for capitalism's ruthless exploitation of women. We need not worry, she claims, about the substantial layer of women who combine paid and unpaid work and are exploited mercilessly in doing so. Women who work in part-time jobs do so because they want to. There are two main elements in Hakim's explanation of developments in the female labour force. First, she tackles the question of explaining the rise in this section of the workforce by denying that much of it happened. She argues that there was little real increase in women's employment until the late 1980s. There are both rational and ridiculous elements in this position. Hakim is able to point out, correctly, that women worked throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Even during the period when women left the paid workforce in substantial numbers, in the second half of the 19th century, many women were working in informal and uncounted ways - for instance, helping out in the family run shops or in domestic service. But this cannot overcome the fact that the numbers of women in the paid workforce did increase from the late 1950s onwards in Britain and in Europe and North America in the 1970s. Hakim gets round this by talking about full-time equivalents, so two or three women working part-time count as only one. Such women are just one part - the "family-centred" part - of a heterogeneous female workforce.

These women have "qualitatively different work priorities" from the other section which seeks full-time work and has a higher degree of commitment to their jobs. In this cheerily optimistic, and totally unreal, version of the world of work there is no need to worry about the prevalence of part-time and temporary work amongst women because "the great majority of part-timers actively prefer their shorter working hours".

It is just bad luck that this inevitably restricts them to low-skill, low-paying jobs. And it is just coincidence that these jobs are frequently the only ones women can get. Hakim runs the danger of reading back results into intentions: many women work part-time so they must choose to. But she is also able to cite various surveys where women say they prefer to work part-time when they have young children. None of these survey results is surprising, in fact, the majority of workers both male and female consistently reply to surveys that they would like to spend less time at work! This hardly proves that part-time women workers prefer insecure and poorly paid employment and that men do not.

And if the choice is low-paid and boring work or childcare and domestic labour then the former certainly

has less appeal. Other evidence tells a different tale. In France and the Scandinavian countries, the number of women in full-time work has been higher over several decades, mostly due to better childcare policies and provision. But in France during the 1980s, the proportion of full-time to part-time women workers fell. This was the result of a conscious policy by companies who created part-time jobs to replace full-time ones. It did not follow from any 'demand' by women workers. Over the EU as a whole, 18% of those working part-time said they would prefer to work full-time - a smaller proportion than male part-time workers but still representing three million women! (EU Employment and Social Affairs Dept. Employment in Europe, 1996) And in Australia, 'involuntary' part-time workers made up 7% of the labour force.

Women are more likely to seek full-time work where they have access to good quality childcare and can afford it. This means that women whose qualifications and skills enable them to get better paid work actually work longer hours and are more likely to work full-time than women from poorer households. Put simply, it is worth working. Like their less well-paid sisters, these women might 'actively prefer' shorter working hours but, strangely enough, they actually work longer. Forty three per cent of working mothers with higher education used childminders or nannies whereas only 9% of those without formal qualifications did so.

In a similar vein, women with the high school leaving certificate in Germany return to the workforce quicker than those with only the junior high school certificate. In each case the women are taking perfectly rational decisions, but these decisions are bound by their position as oppressed members of society. Women's position in the family means restrictions to certain kinds of jobs. On top of this employers positively welcome the existence of an insecure labour force.

Flexibility is their watchword. Hakim ends up as an apologist for the supermarket bosses, who by encouraging all kinds of shift patterns to 'fit in with what women want', get a round-the-clock cheap workforce. Hakim's views caused a bitter and continuing row among feminist academics and politicians. In Britain, Blairites like Patricia Hewitt and Harriet Harman, have avoided Hakim's 'two-tier' model in favour of a pro-work policy which nevertheless shares the idea of promoting flexibility. In Hewitt's brave new post-industrial world the 'male model' of full-time lifetime employment should go, to be replaced by a 'female model'.

Combining home responsibilities and part-time paid work is supposed to give women more control over their lives! Flexibility shouldn't be restricted to just one section of the female workforce, says Hewitt: everyone should benefit. Of course in the official Labour Party propaganda before the last UK election, this flexibility was given a positive spin. Labour didn't talk about low-paid, casualised, flexible work but 'family friendly employment policies where workers choose more flexible modes of working within better paid careers and without loss of employment security'.

Flexibility is not a 'choice' freely made by workers. It is a condition imposed on them by the bosses and accepted by them, in many cases, because it is the only way they can balance work and childcare. Defending the bosses' right to do this, the Committee for Social Justice argued that it is 'possible to over-regulate labour markets' and warned Labour against doing so. What we don't get told by the Labour leaders is that one of the biggest contributors to narrowing the wage gap between men and women is trade union organisation.

Women workers who work in unionised workplaces, and especially where there are collective agreements, are better paid and more secure. A decent minimum wage would also be a major boost to women's income. But at the same time that Harman and her supporters pretend to be fighting for pro-woman policies they are part of a government that is in flight from its pre-election pledges to concede proper trade union rights and a living minimum wage. It turns out that one section of women weren't to be allowed the

same luxury of choice as the rest.

Six months into office and Harriet Harman was introducing the very 'family friendly' policy of cutting the benefits of single mothers. Their flexibility was to be all one way. Similar policies have already been in operation in the US, in measures which deliberately penalise single parent families, pushing women back into dependence on men. The truth is that for all the talk of protection - and it is not all talk, for instance the EU has tried to enforce some minimum regulation - the Harman and Hewitt flexible workforce model is designed for the benefit of the bosses. It is an attempt to square the circle of capital's demand for female labour and its continuing need for unpaid domestic work. It does not and cannot finally solve this problem.

The attacks on welfare provision in Britain and the US are just a taste of things to come as international competition intensifies and the drive for profitability demands increased cuts in budgets. This means that despite the fact that some aspects of domestic labour will continue to be provided by society - either through the market or through state provision - other tasks will devolve back onto the family. Some women will work longer hours to pay for help and others will be forced to combine low-paid work with hours of unpaid labour, but only a small number of women will seriously escape the effects of oppression.

While Hakim tells us that there will be an 'increasing polarisation between work-centred and home-centred women' the real difference will be between a small number of rich women and highly paid professionals and the mass of working class women. Another problem is that sections of employers are finding that total 'flexibility' causes problems especially in periods of boom when workers can move jobs easily.

Over-reliance on part-time staff also causes problems for workplace discipline. Outsourcing and outwork leaves companies vulnerable. In this case the answer is less flexibility, for instance the rise of the 'white collar factory' where young and predominantly female workers are tied to their screen and phone lines as much as any production line worker and are subject to even greater levels of monitoring. While these miserable working conditions weigh down on today's young workers they also point to the fact that, as ever, capitalism cannot escape the consequences of its own drive for profits. Once again, it is creating the conditions for new sections of workers to organise. Neither the pro- nor anti-work feminists understand this dynamic nor see in it the force that will actually help bring about genuine women's liberation.

Women workers and global restructuring

Women have been disproportionately involved in the shift of manufacturing production from metropolitan to less-developed and newly developed countries and, thus, in the growth in the working class worldwide. The major shift from agriculture to industry in the newly industrialised and less-developed countries has affected women even more than men. Between 1960 and 1980 the proportion of the male workforce in developing countries working in industry rose from 15% to 21%.

But the proportion of the female workforce in industry doubled from 8% to 16%. In the last two decades the number of working women has reached, and exceeded, the 50% mark in areas such as the Caribbean and south-east Asia. In south Asia, which historically has had a low percentage of women in paid work, this has jumped from 25% to 44%.

After a partial reversal in the 1980s, female participation increased across Latin America and the Caribbean between 1991 and 1995. While in some developing countries a higher proportion of women in these areas has been drawn into manufacturing than in the imperialist countries, women are nevertheless restricted largely to less well paid jobs and sectors.

More than two-thirds of the global workforce in textiles is female. In better paid sectors women work at the

lower end of the pay scale. Two thirds of women involved in manufacturing are ?labourers, operators or production workers? . Indeed it is precisely because of this cheap labour that a substantial proportion of relocation has taken place

In east and south-east Asia, women provide up to 80% of the workforce in the export processing zones (EPZs). Governments advertised the docility or cheapness of their female workforce. In east and south-east Asia, management paternalism, providing hostels and social events, was intended to keep a patriarchal hold on the workforce. The same pattern appeared, with slight cultural variations, in Central America."

Rosa Martinez produces apparel for US markets on her sewing machine in El Salvador. You can hire her for just 57 cents an hour. Rosa is more than just colourful. She and her co-workers are known for their industriousness, reliability and quick learning? ran one advert. There is some evidence that the proportion of female workers in the EPZs has fallen in the 1990s as more skilled work is needed. Rather than the women getting the necessary training, jobs have gone to men. Another strategy, used particularly in textiles, has been to encourage homeworking.

As noted in the previous section, this has some disadvantages for employers but can be a way of maintaining profits in low-skill occupations where the employers are able to avoid paying insurance, pensions or any other kind of benefit. For many women, their work continues to be centred on subsistence and domestic production, with increasing numbers working partially in the informal sector - that is they have paid work such as food processing and domestic work, but it is hidden and not subject to regulation. In countries such as Indonesia well over half of economically active women exist in this twilight working world. And while the classic ?reserve army of labour? pattern of women?s work has receded worldwide, it was still noticeable in the 1980s debt crisis.

A UN Report noted that in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America women were ?the last to benefit from job expansion and the first to suffer from job contraction". Women lost jobs at a faster rate than men throughout Africa and in many areas participation levels have still not recovered. The structural adjustment programmes that followed frequently worsened daily life for women with cuts in public services and agricultural policies which favoured the export-oriented crops where men were more involved. When women were drawn into production, they were being forced into this by loss of traditional means of support on the land.

Women?s unemployment rates are also higher than men?s in most regions (Britain is one of the exceptions). Women also make up a significant part of the migrant workforce. Although still a smaller proportion than men on a world scale, many more women than men leave the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. Each year about 100,000 women leave the less developed countries in south east Asia to work in the newly industrialised ones - and many of them found they have been sent home as a result of the economic turmoil. In 1986 well over one million Asian women were working elsewhere in Asia or in the Middle East as maids, often in conditions of virtual slavery. In the ex-Stalinist states, too, women have been disproportionately affected by job losses.

In some countries in transition back to capitalism, and in the period preceding this transition, women did lose their jobs at a higher rate than men. By 1996 women made up 71% of the unemployed in Russia and 70% in the Ukraine. In the early 1990s, Polish women workers lost their jobs disproportionately and found other jobs less easily. However, by 1996 a rather different pattern was emerging. In Central and Eastern Europe as a whole, only the Czech Republic and Bulgaria recorded women?s participation as having fallen farther than that of men over the period of the transition (World of Work, 1996). This suggests that women are finding jobs in the restructured economies - but they are experiencing disadvantage and

discrimination. In Russia, women's position has fallen back markedly. In 1995 in Russia women's wages were 40% of men's whereas in the former USSR they had averaged 70%.

In Poland, women have been subject to discriminatory job interviewing about marital status, family duties and obligations. Not surprisingly, many women have been forced into the informal sector. Stalinism had managed to bring many more women into paid work and to achieve higher levels of formal equality than in much of the capitalist world; but its failure to solve the fundamental problems of women's oppression: their double shift, their role within the family meant that, as restoration took hold, women were disadvantaged. Marketisation policies have further undermined their already tenuous hold on resources". The wage gap is widening and gender segregation is also becoming more marked.

Women's position within the international labour force may not be as simply part of a reserve army, but it is still that of a socially oppressed group. In some areas women workers exist on the margins of production and service, in others they are a permanent and necessary part of the formal workforce. Everywhere they experience disadvantage, a disadvantage rooted in their role within the family. Capitalism continues to transform housework, but unevenly. And women still do more housework and childcare in virtually every country.

In Britain, where men have increased their role in the home (and working class men have done so more than managers) there is still a big gap between what both sexes say should happen and what actually happens. In one survey, 62% of the respondents agreed that household cleaning should be shared equally but this only happened in 27% of households. In every task except for "repairing household equipment" and DIY, men did far less than women.

In Japan, the amount of time women spend on unpaid work is nine times that of men. In many countries the total time women spend at work, when paid and unpaid labour is aggregated, is significantly more than men. For instance it is 12% more in Austria, 11% in France. Does this mean that women's position has suffered as a result of their increased participation in the labour force? This is the argument put forward by a number of feminist commentators against the Marxist position. We explained in Trotskyist International 13/14 that many of the criticisms were misplaced.

Marxists have never argued that capitalism would deliver women's liberation; rather that it opened the possibility for women to enter social production and social life, and allowed them a degree of independence. Participation in paid and collective work increases the class consciousness of women members of the working class. It works against atomisation and for collective struggle against exploitation and oppression.

An alternative feminist perspective argues that the actual experience of women, the combination of continued dependence, the subordination at work and so forth is actually a negative experience. For instance, Maria Mies suggests that "feminists everywhere would do well to give up the belief expressed by scientific socialism that capitalism, through its greed for never-ending accumulation and growth has created the preconditions for women's liberation, which can then be realised under socialism.

Today it is more than evident that the accumulation process itself destroys the human essence everywhere because it is based on the destruction of women's autonomy over their lives and bodies". The experience of the EPZs, the transfer of patriarchal relations into the factory, the extension of capitalist production through the payment of poverty rates for outwork - all these for Mies are evidence of the need to abandon the "growth model".

Mies is wrong on several counts. Firstly, she exaggerates the extent of control that women in pre-capitalist

modes of production or in non-socialised domestic labour have over their work and life. Secondly, while for many women their entry into paid work means the 'double shift' and continued subordination, it is the case that world wide, participation in paid labour does increase women's independence within the household. In Singapore a survey reported 'an increasingly egalitarian relationship between husbands and wives' where wives were working.

In Nepal, women increased their participation in domestic decision making where they found work outside the village. Other studies suggest that where men's status is threatened the first reaction can make life difficult for women and can lead to a more oppressive relationship, but this is a temporary phase.

Daughters, particularly in the early years of the EPZs, found heavy restrictions placed on them but continued to battle against these restrictions, seeking escape in education or migration. None of this is to deny the impact of oppression, restrictions and even violence against women, rather it is to insist that capitalism throws up changing and contradictory social relations which contain the possibility of further change. In the working class, capitalism has created its own gravedigger. Increasingly women are a central part of that working class.

They fight as part of it and for their interests within it. In West Africa women trade unionists are working to organise women in the informal sector; in Central America women workers defy harassment and violence to organise maquila workers. They have organised strikes in the Philippines. They continue to organise against both exploitation and their own oppression. Unlike the middle class feminists who object to the 'growth model' and live comfortably on the proceeds of their writing and lecturing, working class women have no choice in their attitude to capitalism.

They have to fight within it and against it. They know that work under capitalism means exploitation, but that there is no salvation in a return to the confines of the home. That is why Marxists welcome the increase in the number of paid women workers. We are not blind to the alienation and misery of the world of work and to the problems it causes for individuals and families.

But it is in that world that we can see the collective strength, manifested in a thousand struggles every day across the globe, of a class that has no historic interest in maintaining women's oppression - the working class. Women workers are increasingly in the vanguard of that class and will play their role in the struggle of that class for a socialist future that will create the conditions for the final liberation of women from their oppression.

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