



Women's Work Exposed: New Trends and Their Implications

Women as workers face many new challenges today, as well as long-standing inequalities in the world of work. This primer provides an overview of global trends that have an impact on the world of work and of some strategies which are used to protect women's worker rights, emphasizing the importance of work issues to all work for women's empowerment and gender equality.

Women as Workers

All women work, whether in factories, fields, organizations, markets, corporations, banks, schools, etc., and/or in their communities and in the home. In fact, women spend much of their lifetime working and the work they do is essential to our societies and our economies. Despite the prevalence of women's work, both paid and unpaid, it seems to have fallen off the agendas of much of the development and women's rights community. **Are we taking women's work for granted?**

Today, women workers face new pressures as well as persistent problems. Ever increasing numbers of women in the paid workforce are often seen as a victory for equality and empowerment, but work conditions in the neoliberal, globalized economy do not necessarily suggest decent jobs or gender equality. Moreover, employment has been 'downgraded' as a policy issue and no longer receives much attention in macroeconomic policy circles.

A snapshot:

- ✓ Globally, women earn 20-30% less than men. (ILO)
- ✓ Women remain at the lower end of a segregated labour market and continue to be concentrated in a few occupations, to hold positions of little or no authority, and to receive less pay than men. (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs)
- ✓ Women's unpaid household labour accounts for about one third of the world's economic production. (UNFPA)
- ✓ In developing countries, women's work hours are estimated to exceed men's by 30 per cent. (UNFPA)
- ✓ Whereas men are more likely to be hired in core and better-paid positions, women are increasingly hired in peripheral, insecure, less-valued jobs including home-based, casual and temporary work. (ILO)
- ✓ At times of economic crisis, women are the first to withdraw from wage and salaried work; they may be forced to enter the informal economy as a result. (ILO)



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Women are working, but poverty is not being eradicated: of the 550 million working poor in the world, approximately 330 million are women.¹

Considering the number of women who are unemployed as well as those who count amongst the working poor, at least 400 million decent jobs would be needed to satisfy women's demands for work.²

This bleak picture is a reality-check on why issues of women's employment and unpaid work are critical to gender justice and sustainable development.

How has the World of Women's Work Changed?

The HIV/AIDS Pandemic:

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), **an estimated 36.5 million people of working age have HIV and by 2005 the global labour force will have lost as many as 28 million workers due to AIDS since the start of the epidemic.³** The epidemic has multiple impacts on women in the countries most affected by HIV/AIDS. As primary caregivers for those who are ill, many women are unable to work for pay or bear a double burden as wage earners and caregivers. In addition, young women are now showing the largest increases in HIV infections, constraining their employment options and opportunities. Where women are responsible for subsistence farming, the burden of caring for ill family members and earning income to replace that lost by ill workers displaces time available for farming, jeopardizing women's capacity to provide for the household.⁴

HIV/AIDS is having an especially severe impact on the education and health sectors, sectors with very high numbers of female workers. The proportion of educators and healthcare providers dying of HIV/AIDS may reach as high as 40 percent by 2010.⁵ It also has a severe impact on children, creating orphans and causing girls to leave school to work or to care for sick family members. Discrimination against those who are infected is another work-related impact. The workplace, however, can also

be part of the solution to the pandemic — providing public education, access to treatment, empowerment and opportunities for those who are infected to remain productive and support themselves and their families.

The North-South Divide:

The gaps between North and South, rich and poor, East and West, continue to grow — wealth has accumulated in the hands of a few while the majority lives in poverty, and richer countries have essentially controlled the agendas of international institutions. One way that these divides manifest is in a surge of migrant labourers. **Both legally and illegally, women are increasingly migrating and female migrants are among the workers most vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.** Many women are moving far from their homes and families, to urban areas and also to foreign countries, to work as domestics, fruit-pickers, entertainers and factory workers, to name just a few. Lack of secure citizenship status, exploitative employers, isolation from families and communities, and the general lack of legal protections all contribute to their vulnerability.

The money sent back to countries of origin by migrants constitutes an increasingly important source of funding for many developing countries. In 2002, global remittances totalled as much as USD 80 billion, well above global transfers of aid.⁶ Push factors (e.g. insecurity and a lack of opportunities at home) and pull factors (e.g. the promise of these monies to send home) therefore tie women's work into global divides across race, class, gender and region.

Environmental Degradation:

As collectors and consumers of energy and natural resources, managers of resources, and workers exposed to health risks, women are significantly affected by pollution, erosion, and contamination. **When women's daily tasks include collecting fuelwood, dung, water, food and medicinal plants, deterioration of the local environment or loss of access to resources make women's work more difficult** — they have to travel further, carry heavier loads and work longer hours to meet daily needs. Furthermore, spraying

pesticides and using other chemicals is a basic part of the job for many agricultural, manufacturing and informal sector workers. Handling and disposal of these chemicals can create health risks for both workers and the surrounding communities. Changes in the natural environment also affect women workers who play a strong role in the protection and rehabilitation of the environment.

Rising Fundamentalisms and Conflicts:

Religious, cultural and ethnic fundamentalist groups throughout the world have systematically built their political strength in recent years. Common to these groups is their condemnation of women's autonomy and their focus on asserting patriarchal control, often initially through restrictions on the appearance of women in public places and the imposition of dress codes, both of which curtail women's work activities. These forces are pushing women out of ~~formal workplaces~~ **they are attempting to define who has the right to work and to education along gender lines.** For example, in the state of Khartoum, Sudan, a ban was imposed in 2000 on women working in public places, citing Islamic law (amid local and international outrage, the Constitutional Court suspended the ban days later).⁷

Armed conflict has also been on the rise in the world, with many struggles related to or propelled by fundamentalist beliefs. Women may be employed in the military or may work within or in support of rebel groups. In some areas, women's work burdens have increased dramatically and the nature of their work has changed as so much of the male population is away fighting or has perished, leaving women to perform the majority of jobs. In conflict situations, educational and career opportunities may also be severely limited.

Globalization and Economic Change:

Globalization is perhaps the trend with the most pervasive impacts on women and work. We have seen the strengthening of the rights of corporations, while the rights of workers and the poor have been weakened. Increasing flexibility for corporations at the top of global supply chains has translated into precarious employment for those at the bottom. And the strong negotiating power of retailers and brand companies has resulted in weaker positions for workers and governments.⁸

In Bangladesh, the garment sector makes up 75% of the country's export earnings and employs 1.3 million people. Export production is concentrated in export processing zones, where local labour laws are exempted.

Women make up 85% of the workforce in Bangladesh's garment sector. These women migrate predominantly from rural areas, seeking cash employment, independence and better opportunities in the garment sector. They work 11-16 hours per day, 7 days per week. For this labour they are paid USD 1.54 per day. - Maquila Solidarity Network

The policy stances associated with the neoliberal ideology of globalization have had many negative impacts on women workers. Labour protections have been reduced or eliminated because they are seen as creating rigidities in economies.

State cutbacks and privatization put people out of work, without sufficient job growth to offer new formal or informal employment opportunities. And export production (particularly agricultural products and assembled goods) has been promoted as a development strategy, although the work conditions are often substandard. Through all of these policy shifts, employment policy was not seen as an important macroeconomic issue.

Women tend to have less education, land, savings and enjoyment of their rights than men, and have the double burden of both paid and unpaid work. They consequently tend to be disproportionately impacted by these changes and left to support the weight of economic and social crises. In addition, **women are more likely to have seasonal, casual, informal or home-based work, with little access to social protections.** As workers' rights are undermined by globalization's many manifestations, women become the social safety net of last resort.



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One symptom of globalization is the *maquiladora* (or *maquila*). *Maquilas* first emerged along the U.S.-Mexico border over 30 years ago and are now found in many parts of Central America and Asia. The companies import components and raw materials duty-free and then export the finished products — including clothing, electronics, and auto parts — for sale in other countries. ***Maquilas* are renowned for their low wages, lack of environmental and labour regulations, and low taxes and duties.** Women, especially young women, often comprise a majority of the employees.⁹

The burgeoning informal sector, another symptom of globalization, includes small, unregulated enterprises as well as self-employed persons. **Worldwide, ever more people are working informally doing tasks such as sewing and assembling microelectronics in their homes or working in unregulated businesses such as street vending.** Large numbers of women work in the informal sector — approximately 90 percent of women working outside of agriculture in India and Indonesia, nearly 75 percent in Zambia, and more than two-thirds of those in the Republic of Korea, for example. In several African countries, the informal sector accounts for nearly 30 percent of total income and it is responsible for 93 percent of new jobs in Africa and 83 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean.¹⁰

Informal sector employment poses particular challenges for women because: it is unregulated and offers no legal status or recognition; it is characterized by long working hours, poor pay and poor work conditions; it is unstable; and it lacks benefits including pensions, insurance, safety and health protection and paid leave. Workers often must absorb the costs of providing their own tools, workspace and raw materials, and women working in the informal sector are often paid less than minimum wage and than other workers doing the same jobs. Despite earlier assumptions that the informal sector was a temporary

manifestation of economic adjustment, **it appears to be an integral component of economic globalization.** In fact, informal work is on the rise in many regions.¹¹

New Technologies:

Technological developments of recent decades — ranging from the Internet and satellites to robotics and genetic manipulation of crops — have transformed women's work,

both in terms of how they perform work tasks on a daily basis and the types of work women do. One example is the standardization and miniaturization of telecommunications and

computer components, which allows companies to transfer manufacturing and assembly of the components to developing countries where labour is cheaper. Similarly, services such as routine accounting can be moved away from corporate headquarters to lower-cost areas. These jobs are often low-skill and repetitive, and they attract large numbers of female workers.

The advent of 'teleworking' (i.e. work done from home or at a distance from the office using telecommunications technology) is one of the most significant changes to women's work as a result of technological developments. It is sometimes promoted as being convenient for women with childcare and household responsibilities, but puts women in the position of having to simultaneously fulfil two jobs. **Teleworking for call centres is likely to become one of the most important sources of employment in the next decade.** It is predicted that by 2007, in India there will be one million jobs in call centres, largely filled by women.¹² Most of these jobs are non-unionized and feature stringently enforced productivity targets.

What Hasn't Changed?

Occupational Segregation and Pay Inequity:

Cultural and social attitudes about gender continue to cause occupational segregation, as does gender inequality in

Much of women's productive activity remains invisible in labour statistics and national accounting, including work in subsistence agriculture, family enterprises and in the home. If household duties were calculated as productive, the value of the world's GDP would increase by 25-30% and women's economic participation rates would be equal to or higher than those of men.

access to education and training. Around the world, women are mainly concentrated in jobs seen as more feminine, such as teaching, nursing, human resources and social services, and they tend to remain in lower job categories than men. While women continue to make inroads in non-traditional fields such as law, engineering, computer science and corporate management, occupational segregation remains prevalent. Within the household, women also continue to perform the bulk of tasks which are deemed more appropriate for women (e.g. cooking, childcare, subsistence agriculture), the majority of the unpaid labour, and in most areas tend to work longer hours than men.

For example, **counting unpaid agricultural work and housework along with wage labour, women's work hours are estimated to exceed men's by 30 percent in developing countries.**¹³ And according to a survey of 200 top companies in Australia, women held only 8.2 percent of board positions and there were only two female Chief Executive Officers.¹⁴ In 2000-2, women's overall share of professional jobs was highest in Eastern Europe and Commonwealth of Independent States at a rate of over 60 percent. This is believed to be a result of long-standing policies supporting working mothers.¹⁵ Moreover, women everywhere typically receive less pay than men, in part because they more often hold the low-level, low-paying jobs in female-dominated professions. Even in equivalent positions, women continue to be paid less than their male counterparts.

Young Women and the New World of Work

Young women face particular challenges as workers today. They have the greatest difficulty entering the labour market and retaining their jobs in economic downturns. **Globally, 35.8 million young women are involuntarily without paid employment today.**¹⁶ The

"Why for example should wall cleaners, who are mainly men, earn more than floor cleaners, who are mainly women, when they work in the same public hospital in the UK?"

Nora Wintour, Public Services International

majority of workers in export-processing zones are young women — working long hours for low wages, often with compulsory overtime, unreasonable production expectations, compulsory pregnancy testing, and unhealthy work conditions. Many young women also work in the informal sector as sex workers and on casual contracts, where work is characterized by a lack of protections, insecurity and minimal organization. **With high levels of unemployment and discouraging future prospects, many young women around the world begin their adult lives in precarious positions.** At the same time, more young women are attending university and career training programs, equipping themselves with knowledge and skills to enter a global economy and competitive, short-term contract work. Many young women are also ardent defenders of women's worker rights and campaign avidly for corporate responsibility and gender equality.

Tools and Agents of Change

Who is promoting women worker's rights? What tools and approaches are available to address these complex and interrelated issues?

Unions and Women's Worker Organizations:

Forming unions to jointly push for improved working conditions is a traditional and popular labour strategy. **Generally, unionized workers have higher wages, more job security, and better benefits than non-unionized workers in similar jobs, and they have better protections against arbitrary management decisions and discrimination.** Some unions also provide support services, educational and training opportunities for their members and opportunities for collective action.

While unions have not always been welcoming or supportive of women, **today millions of women belong to unions.** For example, 5.5 million women are members of the AFL-CIO (the



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federation of U.S.-based unions).¹⁷ Over 600,000 women are members of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a registered trade union in India of women who earn their living through their own labour or small businesses, including home-based workers, street vendors, paper pickers, refuse collectors, etc.¹⁸ Migrant women have also organized, as for example in the UK Kalayaan organization, a self-help network of migrant domestic workers.¹⁹ Organized workers can use their collective power to demand better working conditions, wages and benefits from their employers, lobby governments for better regulations and more progressive trade and investment policies, work together to improve their well-being inside and outside their place of work, and forge alliances with other civil society actors in order to work towards common goals. The changes associated with economic liberalization and neoliberal globalization, however, have reduced the influence of unions in recent years.

International Labour Standards and the Human Rights of Women Workers:

The International Labour Organization, established in 1919, is the oldest international institution. As the only international tripartite organization, it includes representatives of governments, employers and workers in a worldwide effort to set and monitor fair international labour standards. The ILO's conventions articulate standards on issues ranging from work hours to prohibitions on discrimination. Countries that ratify ILO conventions are expected to incorporate them into their national laws and comply with their provisions.²⁰

In 1998, the ILO adopted the *Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work*, which all ILO members have an obligation to respect, promote and realize.²¹ The Declaration defines core labour standards as: freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining; the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour; the effective abolition of child labour; and the elimination of discrimination with respect to employment and occupation. In addition to the *Declaration*,

other key conventions of particular relevance to women's ~~worker rights include the~~ 1996 *Homework Convention*

A "living wage" enables workers to meet their needs for food, water, shelter, clothing, health care and transport, as well as allowing for discretionary income for unplanned events and planning for long-term security. All workers should earn a living wage to participate fully in society and live with dignity.

(No. 177), the *Maternity Protection Convention* (No. 183) of 2000, and the *Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention* (No. 111) of 1958.²²

Other United Nations provisions protect women's rights as workers. Of particular relevance is **Article 11 of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women***: "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of employment in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, the same rights,..." with respect to employment opportunities, free choice of profession and the right to job promotions, job security, benefits and training, equal remuneration, social security, protection of health and safe working conditions, pregnancy and maternity protections, and support services for parents. **Article 22 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*** also protects the right to freedom of assembly, including the right to form a trade union, and **Article 6 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*** recognizes the right to work, including the right of everyone to gain their living by work they freely choose.

Most countries also have national level constitutional provisions, human rights codes, labour laws and various regulations that are relevant to the protection of labour rights. Some countries may also be party to other international agreements such as the *North American Agreement on Labour Cooperation*, a side agreement of the *North American Free Trade Agreement* which provides a mechanism for monitoring the enforcement of labour regulations in Canada, the United States and Mexico.²³ While none of these standards or mechanisms have been fully successful in terms of protecting human rights in work situations, they provide a comprehensive web of standards, mechanisms and rights to bolster advocacy for worker rights protections.

Employment for Empowerment:

Women's employment programs take many forms, from microenterprise funding to targeted job creation and technical skills training workshops. **Through employment women gain income with which to support themselves and their families, they gain independence by controlling some income of their own, and they gain skills and confidence through experience and training.** Moreover, jobs allow women to build personal savings and bring their own resources into development processes. Jobs also give women access to benefits such as social security, paid leave and health benefits in some regions, and are associated with sustained declines in fertility rates.

There is mounting evidence that women's ability to enjoy their human rights and pull themselves out of poverty is integrally linked to their economic empowerment. Creating employment opportunities therefore is a popular development strategy, but **it is important that the focus be on providing decent jobs that are empowering, safe and supportive of their full rights.**

Corporate Codes of Conduct:

Corporate codes of conduct outline the basic rights and minimum standards that a corporation pledges to respect in its relations with workers, communities and the environment. Increasingly, some cover the labour practices of suppliers who are contracted to produce for the company. Most codes include provisions on forced labour, discrimination, child labour, and health and safety; some also mention hours of work, wages and overtime. Companies generally rely on their own personnel for monitoring their compliance with their code, at times allowing local NGOs, human rights organizations or a 'social auditing' firm to investigate.

Codes of conduct are often criticized as mere public relations tools, doing little to change working conditions. Codes have been used successfully in worker's rights campaigns to pressure companies to live up to the standards, and also as educational tools for workers and activists. To improve the potential of corporate codes as tools for progressive change, labour, NGO, student and religious organizations are demanding a greater role in monitoring, increased corporate disclosure of information, and transparent mechanisms for workers and labour rights advocates to lodge complaints and challenge auditors' reports.²⁴

The Association for Women's Rights in Development is an international membership organization connecting, informing and mobilizing people and organizations committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and women's human rights. A dynamic network of women and men, AWID members are researchers, academics, students, educators, activists, business people, policy-makers, development practitioners, funders and others, half of whom are located in the global South and Eastern Europe.

AWID's goal is to cause policy, institutional and individual change that will improve the lives of women and girls everywhere. Since 1982, AWID has been doing this by facilitating on-going debates on fundamental and provocative issues as well as by building the individual and organizational capacities of those working for women's empowerment.

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Endnotes:

¹ "Working poor" refers to people who work but do not earn enough to be above the USD 1 per day poverty line.

² International Labour Organization, "Global Employment Trends for Women 2004," 3.

³ International Labour Organization, "HIV/AIDS and Work: Global Estimates, Impact and Responses," 2004.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Jeremy Scott-Joynt, "The Remittance Lifeline", BBC News, UK Edition on-line, March 18, 2004.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, "Women's Human Rights: Labor Rights" in *World Report 2001*.

⁸ Oxfam International, "Trading Away Our Rights: Women Working in Global Supply Chains", 2004.

⁹ Maquila Solidarity Network at <http://www.maquilasolidarity.org>.

¹⁰ Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) at <http://www.wiego.org>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Natasha Primo, "Gender Issues in the Information Society", UNESCO: 2003, 50.

¹³ UNFPA, *State of the World's Population*, 2000.

¹⁴ International Labour Organization, "Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Women in Management: 2004 Update".

¹⁵ International Labour Organization.

¹⁶ International Labour Organization, "Global Employment Trends for Women 2004", 2.

¹⁷ See <http://www.afl-cio.org>.

¹⁸ See <http://www.sewa.org>.

¹⁹ See <http://www.ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/kalayaan/home.htm>.

²⁰ See <http://www.ilo.org>.

²¹ See <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/declaris>.

²² The texts and ratification information on ILO conventions can be found at <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/index.htm>.

²³ For further information on the NAALC see <http://www.naalc.org/>.

²⁴ Maquila Solidarity Network, "Codes Primer".

<http://www.maquilasolidarity.org/resources/codes/primer1.htm>.

Putting Women as Workers Back on the Agenda

For development and human rights advocates, the issues and mechanisms associated with women as workers have particular relevance. If workers cannot care for themselves or their families, what are the long-term poverty eradication prospects of the country? If women do not enjoy equality in employment opportunities, remuneration and career advancement, how can gender equality be realized? And if we blindly pursue the objective of creating jobs for women, without interrogating the quality of those jobs or the experiences of women as workers, are our efforts really contributing to the well-being of women?

The issues and strategies of women as workers are critical to the goals of women's human rights and sustainable

development, yet as social justice, human rights and development organizations, we tend to leave it to unions and organizations of women workers to address them. **Work must be considered in all of our strategies for gender and economic justice.** When thinking about security for example, the issues of violence against women must be considered alongside job security and living wages, which are key to living free from violence and bringing women out of poverty. When thinking of young women's empowerment, we should consider the labour market they face and their need for decent, secure jobs in order to be active participants in their societies. Holistic strategies for economic and gender justice cannot but prioritize issues of women and work.

Women and Work: Some Stats and Facts

In Chile, 75% of women in the agricultural sector are on temporary contracts picking fruit, working more than 60 hours a week during the fruit-picking season. One in three earns less than minimum wage. (Oxfam, "Trading Away Our Rights")

In the United States, 33% of low-wage working women did not have paid sick leave in 2000; that jumped to 45% in 2004. (Christian Science Monitor)

There are at least 40,000 home-based workers in Canada's garment industry. The vast majority are immigrant women of colour. (Maquila Solidarity Network)

Latin America is the most dangerous place in the world for trade unionists. In 2002, 184 trade unionists were murdered in Colombia alone. (American Center for International Labor Solidarity/AFL-CIO)

1.6 million women work for Wal-Mart, the largest private sector employer in the U.S. A class action lawsuit has been brought against the retailer alleging systematic bias against women in pay and promotion. (Christian Science Monitor)

In Kenya, interviews with 400 women working on coffee and tea plantations and in textile plants revealed that 90% had experienced or witnessed sexual abuse on the job. (Christian Science Monitor)

In China's Guangdong province, one of the world's fastest growing industrial areas, young women face 150 hours of overtime each month in the garment factories. 60% have no written contract and 90% have no access to social insurance. (Oxfam, "Trading Away Our Rights")

Two-thirds of the economically active population in Latin America – including 80% of women – is ineligible for social security in the form of either health care or pensions. (American Center for International Labor Solidarity/AFL-CIO)

According to a study conducted in India, the household incomes of HIV/AIDS sufferers drop by one-third, while expenditure on food and treatment increases substantially. Nearly 38% reported having to withdraw their children from school and send them to work as a result. (ILO)



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