

India: Identifying the Foundations of Womens' Oppression, Charting the Course of Struggles for Liberation

Wednesday 29 March 2017, by [CPI \(ML\) Liberation](#) (Date first published: 29 March 2017).

Contents

- [Origins of Gender Oppression](#)
- [Capitalism Needs Domestic \(...\)](#)
- [Who Does The Tasks Of Social](#)
- [Challenging the Patriarchal](#)
- [Disciplinary Methods Drawn \(...\)](#)
- [Communal Fascism and the \(...\)](#)
- [Some Conclusions](#)
- [Box: Salt of the Earth](#)

8 March - International Women's Day - was born in the struggles that women factory workers in their thousands waged against bondage a century ago. Communists began the tradition of observing IWD in memory of those struggles. Ironically, the powers-that-be and the advertisements all across try to hide the real legacy of Women's Day and seek to establish a different narrative. They try to tell us that International Women's Day (IWD) is an occasion when husbands are supposed to buy women washing machines and kitchen gadgets, when boyfriends are supposed to buy them flowers, and governments are supposed to make promises for 'women empowerment'. So it is important for us to collectively reassert the fighting legacy of the international women's day and draw lessons for the tasks and challenges at hand. On the occasion of International Women's Day 2017 let us reiterate some key concerns of the women's movement.

Origins of Gender Oppression

Women's oppression is not 'natural' - it came into being in the course of human history. Marxism helps us to identify the material circumstances in which such oppression was born and in which it is sustained. In the most early human societies, women were not oppressed, and there was no rigid 'gender division of labour.' That is, women could hunt and gather food just as men did. Women were revered for their ability to give birth, and pregnant women or nursing mothers might stay away from hunts. But as such, there was no concept of gender inequality.

Engels, in his book "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State", shows us that institutions like 'family' and monogamous marriage are historic institutions - i.e. they came into being at a certain juncture in history, coinciding with the rise of private property and class conflict.

Engels looks are historic evidence of how early human societies - and surviving indigenous (adivasi) societies - do not have systematic gender or class inequality and oppression. The knowledge of who is the father of a child is not considered important. Families trace their lineage from mother to

daughter.

With the domestication of animals and with agriculture, humans were able to create and preserve a surplus - over and above the bare minimum needed to survive. Class-divisions emerged in society as a section of humans began to control the surplus and treat it as 'private property' or private wealth. Coinciding with the emergence of class society, we find the rise of inequality between men and women.

The family and monogamous marriage are institutions that help to ensure that property can be inherited from father to son - and to ensure a legitimate son, women's sexuality must be controlled and monogamy ensured. Engels shows how throughout the history of monogamy, monogamy has been enforced only on women while men have been free to have sexual relations outside of marriage. We can add here that the ideological privileging of heterosexual monogamy was also accompanied in some societies by the criminalisation of homosexuality and other sexual orientations and identities. Just as there is nothing 'natural' about women's oppression, there is nothing 'unnatural' about homosexuality.

With the rise of private property, production moved outside the household and was controlled by men - while tasks of 'reproduction' - not only bearing children but the work of 'reproducing' society and the next generation, i.e. cooking, cleaning, caring for children, the elderly etc. were relegated to the 'private' sphere (the family) and allotted to women. The gender division of labour was born. Engels observed that

"With the patriarchal family, and still more with the single monogamous family, a change came. Household management lost its public character. It no longer concerned society. It became a private service; the wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production."

What happens to the family institution under capitalism? Capitalism requires women and even children to be drawn into the workforce as paid labour. But it also requires women to continue to bear the burden of unpaid care work inside the household. Let us understand this problem a little better.

Capitalism Needs Domestic Labour

Marx identified labour power as the source of surplus value. What is surplus value? It is value produced by the worker in excess of the minimum value required to sustain and regenerate the worker and replenish his or her labour power. The capitalist seeks to push down this minimum value as low as possible, so as to increase the surplus value. That is, it seeks to pay the worker as little as possible. *To understand this better, let's look at a poster.*

The poster shows workers entering a factory gate in the morning and coming out in the evening. What happens between that entry and exit? How do the workers who exit the workplace exhausted each evening - their labour power depleted - make it to work again the next morning with their labour power replenished? The answer is: the workers' labour power is replenished by those who cook meals for them, provide various kinds of comfort and care inside the home. And the bulk of such work is done by women.

The capitalist knows that workers need meals, a roof over the head, a bed, sleep - so as to be available for work the next day. Plus, the capitalist also needs the workforce of the future to be reproduced - i.e. children to be born. And it needs future workers (children of workers) to be cared for. It also needs the unemployed - members of the reserve army of labour - to be cared for. Moreover there is the problem of past workers - retired workers, aged and elderly people etc. But

the capitalist does not wish to have to bear the burden of this cooking and care, because if either the individual capitalist or the State pays for this burden, it decreases the surplus value produced by the worker. Much of this (unpaid) labour of cooking, cleaning, caring for children and the elderly, providing loving human communication and care is done by people within households, families and communities – and the bulk of this labour is done by women.

Let us look at **another poster** from the workers' struggle for the 8-hour day. The poster declares that the 24-hour day must be divided into three parts: 8 hours each for work, rest, and 'what we will' (whatever we like or enjoy). Of course, the capitalist wants to increase the 'work' part of the day as much as possible, and shrink the 'rest' and 'leisure' part of the day as much as possible. Contract sanitation workers working for the Bengaluru Municipal Corporation get no leave, no holidays. During a Strike they observed on 8 March, Monisha, the teenage daughter of one of the workers Meena, told a journalist that Meena had always wanted to visit Cubbon Park, and she would take her there if only the corporation would give the workers a day off. (See the report by Sanjana on the Strike in this IWD feature in this issue of *Liberation*.) Time for leisure – to visit a park, relax with one's daughter – is still important even for those workers who have other very pressing demands.

But think about this 24-hour day from the point of view of a woman.

If a woman is not a paid worker, she is actually working 24 hours a day – because domestic labour has no fixed working hours: if a baby cries in the night or wets itself, it must be attended to immediately. If she is a paid worker, she is doing a double shift, because after a hard day at work, she still has to come home and cook and care for others. She does not have 8 hours for rest and 8 hours for 'what you will' (which can include leisure, enjoyment as well as something like attending meetings of unions and women's organisations.) She has a much harder struggle than men to make time for these activities.

Think about it – this domestic labour is endless. It involves collecting fuel and water as well as the actual process of cooking. It involves playing with children, wiping the tears of a crying child, waking up in the middle of the night to care for a sick child or adult.

Now some will say – 'how great women are, they do this wonderful work uncomplainingly, because that is the **nature** of women. Women's Day is an occasion to salute such women, give them our respect.' But we say that **such 'praise' is an ideological ploy** – a way of justifying and glorifying oppression. The women's movement as well as revolutionary Marxists all over the world have challenged the ideology that claims that such unpaid, unrecognised labour of social reproduction is 'natural' to women and is 'women's work.' They have said that a) men must share this domestic labour and b) the employer and the State must be made to bear greater burdens of social reproduction, by providing welfare measures, water, fuel, food, messes or canteens providing cooked food, pensions for the elderly, healthcare, maternity benefits, education and child care etc.

Who Does The Tasks Of Social Reproduction?

Women, as we have already noted, bear the bulk of the burden of domestic labour, which is part of the labour of 'social reproduction.' Capitalism needs labour power to be reproduced – and women bear the burden of this reproduction. **The tasks of social reproduction do not only comprise unpaid work done inside the home: they also comprise paid domestic work, sanitation work, cooking mid-day meals in schools, teaching, healthcare work and so on.** In India such work is often contractualised and extremely underpaid. It is no coincidence that much of this underpaid work of social reproduction is also done by women. *And also, Dalits and Dalit women do a disproportionate share of the forms of social reproductive labour that are considered 'dirty.'*

Social reproduction also involves the reproduction of the entire structure of oppressive social relationships of class, caste, gender, race – day after day, generation after generation. In India, controlling women's reproduction and sexuality is required not only to maintain the patriarchal transfer of private property but also to ensure the reproduction of the caste system. It is in large measure through the institutions of family/household that control of women's reproduction and sexuality is achieved and women's unpaid domestic labour is made possible.

Challenging the Patriarchal Commonsense of 'Private/Public', 'Home/World' Binary

*A Marxist approach to the women's movement helps us to look at the entire structure of society – and the role of women's inequality and oppression – **whole rather than through the binaries of 'ghare' and 'baire', 'family' and 'workplace,' 'private' and 'public.'***

In the dominant discourse, we find that on the one hand it is argued that women are 'safe' within families and face 'danger' when 'forced' to go 'outside' (to work, to defecate, to study etc). On the other hand, gender and caste discrimination, oppression and violence is defined as a problem of 'culture' – basically a problem of the sphere of the 'family' or 'community,' and so the 'private' problem of individuals and families or the 'cultural' problem of communities rather than the problem and responsibility of the State and public institutions. How do we challenge this dominant discourse?

We can see very clearly how the family/household institution disciplines and schools women in unpaid care work duties; teaches men entitlement over women's labour, sexuality and reproduction; defines domestic violence as the "chastisement" of women for failure to do her "duties"; and helps to reproduce the ideologies and hierarchies of caste and gender, generation after generation.

In India, National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2005-06 data, as well as data gathered by the Indian Human Development Survey (IHDS) 2012 establish how denial of autonomy is itself a form of violence and discrimination faced by Indian women. It is important to emphasise this point, **because State policies as well as patriarchal common sense often prescribe and impose restrictions on women's autonomy and mobility in the name of keeping them 'safe' from violence.**

- *Only 5% of women in India have sole control over choosing their husbands – IHDS 2012*
- 79.88% of women need permission to visit a health centre – IHDS 2012

NFHS 2005-06 data shows that the patriarchal sense of entitlement to women's domestic services, helps legitimise domestic violence. Between 34-62 percent of men and women – ranging from educated to illiterate – believe that domestic violence is justified for one reason or another. Both category of respondents, men and women, tended to justify wife beating on the following 'grounds' – if wives argue with the husband, fail to show proper respect to in-laws, neglect the house or children, or go out without telling the husband. Women are tied by very widespread domestic violence to the social reproductive domestic roles 'fixed' for them – but patriarchal hegemony ensures that a large percentage of women accept such violence as the norm.

Even rape statistics in India reveal a high level of disguised violence against women's autonomy. In her article 'Rape, Rhetoric and Reality', (*The Hindu*, December 19, 2014), Rukmini S points out that no less than 40% of "what is classified as rape (in Delhi police files) is actually parental criminalisation of consensual sexual relationships, often when it comes to inter-caste and inter-religious couples." Each of the women in these 'rape' cases, then, are victims not of rape, but

of coercion and violence by their own parents, families, and communities in their own homes. But this violence remains an open secret, in which even the police is complicit, and such violence now enjoys political sanction and encouragement from political forces patronised by ruling parties.

Domestic violence as well as restrictions on women's mobility then are inflicted on women by the families and communities they are born in, in order to prevent them from posing a threat to the caste order. And once married, women are subjected to domestic violence to discipline them into performing social reproductive labour. In India marriage involves moving into the marital home, which is often far away from the woman's natal home. One of the most common forms of domestic violence is to prevent the newly-wed woman from contacting her parents and friends. The bride is subjected to various forms of humiliation and shaming – a sort of 'ragging' that is supposed to break her into her new role. As a result, the newly-wed bride's situation becomes comparable in vulnerability to that of migrant labour. This isolation and vulnerability of the new bride, a migrant in 'her own home,' mostly disguised and romanticised ideologically, becomes starkly visible in instances for example in Haryana where, thanks to the low sex ratio, brides are 'imported' and purchased from other states.

Disciplinary Methods Drawn From Caste and Household Systems

Not only households, even the State feel entitled to demand social reproductive labour from women: both unpaid labour inside the home as well as severely underpaid 'voluntary' labour from incentive- or honorarium-based workers. **The State, then, has no interest in challenging the systematic denial of women's autonomy or the 'normalcy' of domestic violence.** This leads to a peculiar situation where state-led campaigns exhort society to allow girls to be born – so that they can grow up to fulfil social reproductive duties later! *Beti Bachao campaign slogans such as Beti nahin bachaoge to bahu kahan se laoge* (If you don't save a daughter today how will you get a bride tomorrow) – reflect the fact that such campaigns originated in Haryana with the 'Unmarried Men's Union' (Avivahit Purush Sangathan) who declared that the low sex ratio was preventing them from getting the brides from the prescribed caste and community – brides they felt entitled to having. The Swachh Bharat campaign widely uses slogans and advertisements suggesting that toilets should be built so that daughters and daughter-in-law, who should be veiled and whose place is in the home, should never have to go outside the house.

Widespread restrictions on women's mobility in India are one of the factors responsible for the low workforce participation rate of women. The state and capitalist forces want more women to be drawn into the labour force – but at the same time they want to prevent and curb the likely consequences of women joining the workforce: greater autonomy and mobility and control over their own lives.

In both production and social reproduction work, women workers are disciplined using tools and methods drawn from the social reproductive spheres of the household and the education system, as well as from the caste system. By doing so, the Indian State and Indian Governments seek to offer a docile, disciplined and unlikely-to-revolt (or so they hope) female workforce as an incentive to global capital to 'Make in India.' So, young women garment workers (mostly Dalit) in Tamil Nadu factories producing for global brands, keep women under strict surveillance in hostels, prevent any social outing or mobility outside the hostel or factory premises; punish socialisation between female and male workers; ban mobile phones for women workers and mete out humiliating casteist punishments to them for violating these rules. The factory managements justify these restrictions (similar to restrictions in women's hostels in education institutions) by claiming that the workers' families demand them.

The social relationships of caste and gender together are also other means of disciplining workers. For instance, in rural Bihar or Andhra Pradesh, the upper caste landlord will assert a feudal sense of entitlement over not only the labour but the sexual being of Dalit women labourers. What happens when the women workers migrate to the city? One woman sanitation worker in Bangalore, a Dalit migrant woman from Andhra Pradesh, referring to the fact that the contractors are also from Andhra Pradesh and inevitably from the dominant Reddy (Kapu) caste, put it this way, “We escaped our villages in Chittur, Nellore, Ananthpuram and other districts of Andhra and ran to Bangalore to escape the caste oppression at the hands of the Kapus and they have now followed us to the cities and force us to shed our sweat and blood for them to prosper!”

Communal Fascism and the Metaphor of ‘Family’

Communal fascists also exploit the widespread anxieties over women’s sexual autonomy as a threat to the caste system. They use the slogan of love jihad to foment communal hatred and violence directed at real and imagined inter-faith love.

It is significant that one of the central metaphors of the Sangh’s ‘social harmony’ rhetoric is that of the ‘home’ - ‘Ghar,’ and its sister-term ‘family’ - ‘parivar.’ This metaphor is evoked to valorize the patriarchal family and subjugation of women - even to the extent of justifying wife-beating as necessary chastisement of erring wives. (‘Holier Than Cow: Wisdom on women from a Rashtra Sevika Sangh camp,’ Neha Dixit, Outlook, 28 January 2013) The RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat describes the RSS as ‘familyist not feminist;’ feminist assertions of women’s autonomy are painted as Western-inspired disruptions of the harmonious Indian family. Oppressive social practices and restrictions on women’s mobility are all rationalized as having evolved to ‘protect’ women from ‘rapacious Muslims’.

Hindu religion is described, moreover, as the ‘home’ for Dalits and Muslims, and to prescribe and order ‘ghar wapsi’ - ‘return home’ for these sections. The RSS and BJP recast relations between workers and bosses as harmonious relations within the ‘industry family,’ whereby justifying erosion and dilution of labour laws. To justify child labour and dilute the child labour abolition laws, in the name of allowing ‘family-based’ occupations to employ children.

The analogy of ‘family’ and ‘home’ are invoked not only to glamourise gender hierarchy but class and caste hierarchies. And communal violence in the name of curbing ‘love jihad’ are as hostile to women’s autonomy and equality as to the claims of Muslim and Dalit men to equality and dignity.

Some Conclusions

What are some of the conclusions that revolutionary Marxists and all those who want to fight patriarchy and structures of oppression can draw?

We cannot say that we must fight ‘cultural’ arena first, change mindsets, and that the task of challenging structures of production can come ‘later.’

Neither can we say that we must fight ‘economic’ oppression first and that the questions of violence and discrimination and attacks on women’s autonomy inside households can come ‘later.’

We can’t say we will fight communal fascism first, women’s rights and equality can come ‘later.’

We can’t say we will fight to annihilate caste first, and questions of gender and women’s freedom

can come 'later.'

We have to fight on all these fronts together - seeing how essential each such fight is to other fights.

It means the asserting the right to autonomy in households and family - women's azaadi (freedom) inside homes from their own parents, brothers, husbands, control over her own life, decisions, sexuality and reproduction - as central to struggles to annihilate caste, resist communalism, organise working class struggles. It means working class struggles can't be organised only on factory floors or workplaces - but everywhere, including in the communities where workers live. In those areas, it will mean demanding state support for social reproductive tasks (homes, running water, fuel, public toilets, food rations, children's education, health, maternity entitlements, pensions for all etc). □

Box: Salt of the Earth

The 1954 film *Salt of the Earth*, based on a real miners' struggle of 1950s USA, shows how Mexican-American mine-workers in America realise, during a historic Strike, that they cannot win the battle against the bosses without the unity and mutual equality and respect of the male mine-workers and the women. The male workers and Union leaders initially don't think the women's demand for hot running water in their homes (as was provided in the white workers' homes) was worth including in the Strike's main demands. They would tell women that the first priority was workplace safety and wage equality between Mexican and white workers, and better sanitation could come 'later.'

The women in reply remind of the immense labour it takes to chop wood as fuel to heat water needed for daily chores: "We ought to be in the wood choppers' union. Chop wood for breakfast. Chop wood to wash his clothes. Chop wood, heat the iron. Chop wood, scrub the floor. Chop wood, cook his dinner." When a court order prohibits male workers from picketing, women take over the Strike's picket lines. When women are jailed, men have to do the unwaged housework - and quickly realise how housework 'never ends', and how important the issue of hot running water is. They realise the need to address "two kinds of slavery, wage slavery and domestic slavery" and the question of "Equality in jobs, equality in the home" together.

In the film, *Esperanza*, the wife of the Union leader Ramon who resents her activism and independence, says to him, "Yes. I talk of dignity. The Anglo bosses look down on you, and you hate them for it. "Stay in your place, you dirty Mexican" — that's what they tell you. But why must you say to me, "Stay in your place." Do you feel better having someone lower than you? Whose neck shall I stand on, to make me feel superior? And what will I get out of it? I don't want anything lower than I am. I'm low enough already. I want to rise. And push everything up with me as I go ...And if you can't understand this you're a fool — because you can't win this strike without me! You can't win anything without me!"

Ramon eventually understands this truth, and the united action of men and women together wins the Strike. This 1954 film teaches us a lot today - about how issues of 'equality' (of race/caste and gender) at the workplace as well as in the community and in households are as central to class struggle as the issues of wages.

It will mean asserting women's right to toilet breaks, food, workplace safety, healthcare etc - as well as equal wages and committees against sexual harassment at the workplace. It will mean asserting that Dalit men and women will no longer do the work of cleaning human or animal excreta or animal carcasses. It will mean challenging the feudal-style caste hierarchies between maalik (boss) and

mazdoor (worker) that are found in rural India but often reproduced in cities. It means fighting for women's fullest freedom in those communities and in the process confronting caste and communal divisions directly and breaking down these divisions. It will mean asserting the right of all women to leisure and pleasure, liberty and equality.

P.S.

* LIBERATION. CENTRAL ORGAN OF CPI(ML). April 2017, Number 4:

<https://cpiml.org/liberation/april-2017/identifying-the-foundations-of-womens-oppression-charting-the-course-of-struggles-for-liberation>