



## WORLD MARCH OF WOMEN THIRD INTERNATIONAL ACTION

### **Women's Work (Women's Economic Autonomy)**

For women, economic autonomy refers to their capacity to support themselves and their dependents, and to decide the best way to do so. Economic autonomy is therefore much broader than financial autonomy, in that it also includes access to social security and public services.

Wages are not the only source of our autonomy; rather the latter also depends on our training, our education, our access to common goods, credit, the solidarity economy and public services. We also produce non-monetary wealth that we redistribute directly, without passing through the formal financial system: from a young age women dedicate a large part of their time to the satisfaction of the needs of society, the members of their families and their communities.

Despite women's creativity in their struggle for autonomy, however, many encounter restrictions in achieving it. There are countries, communities, and families in which women are required – by law or by custom – to get authorisation from their father, husband, or another man in the family to be able to engage in paid work. In addition, in many countries women have fewer years of formal education than men and girls have difficulty remaining in school; while in others, the educational level of women has been on the increase, but they are statistically more often unemployed or earn significantly less than men with similar educational backgrounds.

Furthermore, in almost every country in the world it is women who are primarily responsible for the so-called reproductive work: the care of children, the house, their husbands, the sick and elderly. Thus, in the search for their economic autonomy, women are always managing their time and availability in order to be able to carry out care-giving work *and* paid work. For this reason, they are often limited to part time or informal jobs that allow them the flexibility to pick their children up from school, look after their health care needs, etc.

#### **Women's work around the world**

The little systematised information that we have about women's work focuses on their formal, registered work (rather than unpaid work). We know that in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, women work very hard, but dignified jobs with decent salaries and social security are the exception. In northern Africa, women's participation in the job market is extremely low, due to the fact that most women have to ask permission from a male family member to work outside the home. The difference in access to employment for men and women in this region is the highest in the world, followed by the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> In Latin America and

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<sup>1</sup>According to International Labour Organization (ILO) data for the year 2007, taking into account the world average of working-age people, only 49.1% of women were employed, compared to 74.3% of men. The employment-population relation for women varies from region to region, being higher in East Asia (65.2%) and sub-Saharan Africa (56.9%) and lower in Northern Africa (21.9%) and the Middle East (28.1%). Employed women are those who are engaged in some type of paid work, for at least one hour during the specified reference period, for a wage or salary (remunerated work) or for the benefit of the family (independent work).



## WORLD MARCH OF WOMEN THIRD INTERNATIONAL ACTION

the Caribbean, women are employed mainly in the service sector, often in vulnerable jobs, although they also work in large numbers in the informal sector, as artisans, farmers, saleswomen, etc. The highest rates of women's activity are found in East and Southeast Asia and the Pacific, where jobs are characterised by extremely long workdays. In Europe, the United States, Canada, and Japan, the probability of women being employed in lower responsibility positions and part time jobs is higher compared to men.

The organisation of the neoliberal capitalist economic system is based on the exploitation of women's work:

- 1) Women systematically earn less than their male colleagues for the same work (their salaries are still considered supplementary to men's – see discussion below on feminist economics) and both female and male workers are forced to compete with each other for precarious jobs within the neoliberal system, thereby permitting the reduction of salaries and work conditions in general, and on an international level;
- 2) Work is typically precarious: flexible hours, unpaid overtime, part time and / or short term contracts, prohibition of trade-unions, rights gained no longer respected, lack of social security and health and safety measures, etc;
- 3) The female labour force sustains manufacturing and assembly industries (*maquilladoras*) and the monoculture production of fruits, vegetables, and flowers for agricultural exportation. It also sustains the service industry, currently the number one world sector for the employment of women, in large part due to the immigration of poor women to wealthier countries (south to north; east to west) for employment in the domestic and care-giving sector;
- 4) Women immigrants send a significant part of their earnings home to support family in their countries of origin – money transfers that have a significant influence on the economy in these countries – and therefore their migration is encouraged, despite the fact that the majority of women's options are limited to the service or sex industries (and often in clandestine conditions);
- 5) The privatisation of public services and cutbacks in public spending on health, education, child-care services and basic water and sanitation have resulted in an increase in domestic and community work performed by women;
- 6) At least 12.3 million people around the world are trapped in forced labour, which includes the following: debt bondage, human trafficking (which, after drug trafficking is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest mafia worldwide, with as much as US\$10 billion profit per year) and other forms of modern slavery. The victims are the most vulnerable – women and girls forced into prostitution, migrants trapped in debt bondage, and sweatshop or farm workers kept there illegally (often by force) and paid little or nothing.

The recent food, environment, energy and financial crisis – direct consequences of the exploitative, speculative, neoliberal world system – have in turn exacerbated the chances of women finding employment, intensified the precariousness of jobs that still exist, and increased poverty levels for women and men.

### **Feminist economics as a principle**

Feminist economics places the sustainability of human life and the collective well being at the centre of economic and territorial organisation, and questions the market society in which the norm for relationships among people, between people and their bodies, and

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## WORLD MARCH OF WOMEN THIRD INTERNATIONAL ACTION

between people and nature, is that of a business in which the company's profit is what matters most. It aligns itself with other practices and principles that question the current economic order, such as solidarity economics and food sovereignty, to create new practices and new theoretical analysis.

Feminists question the dominant economic paradigms which only recognise the production of merchandise (goods and services sold in the market) and in which economic agents behave in a way that prioritise individual interests, maximising utility at minimum cost. These suppositions may apply for a white, 30-something man, holder of capital, but not for the majority of humanity. Despite their lack of basis in reality, these are the paradigms that guide the policies of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the majority of governments in the world.

We use feminist economics to make women's contribution to the economy more visible, to highlight their experiences and to show how the production of merchandise is linked with social reproduction, that is, the production of people and of life: pregnancy and giving birth; the care of children, the sick and elderly; the care of adult men in order for them to be available and healthy for the labour market. Care implies not only the preparation of food, cleaning the house and washing and ironing, but also affection and emotional security and the sustaining of the social network that keeps families, neighbourhoods and communities together.

Feminist economics also questions the sexual division of labour, which attributes productive work (production of merchandise) to men, and reproductive work (caring for people) to women, as well as establishing a hierarchy in which the former is more important than the latter. There are currents of feminist economics which seek to quantify women's non-paid work in the family and the community, and lobby to have it included in national accounting, in Gross National Product (GNP) calculations and in budgets. Others seek to make visible both the amount of time women spend carrying out domestic work and their physical and emotional availability in the care of others. Feminist economics also shows how values (such as cooperation and reciprocity) and skills (such as dexterity, flexibility and patience) are used by businesses. However, this is not transformed in benefits (be they more responsibility, more pay...) in relation to women, in whom these values and skills are traditionally seen as 'natural' rather than learnt

### **Towards greater economic autonomy**

Governments and economic policy makers fail to consider that women have the right to paid employment. They begin with the assumption that people live in traditional nuclear families: father, mother, and children. In this model, the father guarantees the support of the family with his earnings, while the mother, after having done all the domestic chores, may work to earn some 'extra' money. This is far from the truth. Contrary to the prevailing view that men are the sole providers of their families and communities, many women support their families alone or share this responsibility with their partner or other adults.

In order for *all* women to have economic autonomy, we have to build a society in which work – in all its forms - is recognised and valued. Riches produced through human work are concentrated in the hands of those with capital (owners of banks, businesses, etc) through profit and interest, and we demand that this logic be inverted, that these riches be used for the remuneration of labour.



## WORLD MARCH OF WOMEN THIRD INTERNATIONAL ACTION

We understand that economic autonomy for all women will never be possible within the capitalist system, whose very *raison-d'être* is based on the exploitation of people and the environment. The goals of our actions and demands are the redistribution of wealth and the rights to employment for all, decent production and trade conditions, opportunities for personal growth, and free time.

We want a society with full employment for women and men; where young men and women are not forced to engage in paid work so early in their lives; where people have enough free time for themselves and to participate in their communities; where those men and women who want to make a living from agriculture, artisan work, from small businesses, or small production cooperatives can support themselves without being trampled by banks, big business, and especially transnational corporations aiming to concentrate all resources in their own hands. The role of the State is fundamental in the creation and application of government policies that guarantee income in times of sickness, unemployment, maternity and paternity leave, and retirement (generalised social protection).

These policies will only be effective, however, in countries and regions at peace. Violence and the threat of violence is the biggest obstacle in achieving economic autonomy. It destroys livelihoods, leaves whole populations unemployed, maintains women prisoners in their own home, and promotes fundamentalisms of all kinds (which in turn reduces women's freedom of movement and possibilities for economic autonomy). We demand an end to the militarisation of our countries and our planet, to imperialism, to never-ending conflicts and wars waged for the control of territory, natural resources, populations, political power... Only in the absence of conflict will economic autonomy for all women and men become a reality.

### **In the struggle for women's economic autonomy we demand:**

- The rights of all workers (including vulnerable workers, such as domestic and migrant workers) to employment with safe and healthy working conditions, without harassment and in which their dignity is respected, throughout the world and without discriminations (nationality, sex, disability, etc) of any kind;
- The right to social security, involving income transfers in the case of sickness, disability, maternity and paternity leave and retirement that permit women and men to have a decent quality of life;
- Equal salaries for equal work for women and men, also taking into account the remuneration of work in rural areas;
- A fair minimum wage<sup>2</sup> (one that reduces the difference between the highest and lowest salaries and permits workers to support themselves and their families) instituted by law that serves as a reference for all paid work (public and private) and public social payments. The creation or strengthening of a policy of permanent valorisation of the minimum wage and common values for sub-regions or regions;

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<sup>2</sup> Wages are hourly; a salary is monthly or yearly



## **WORLD MARCH OF WOMEN THIRD INTERNATIONAL ACTION**

- The strengthening of the solidarity economy with low interest credit, support for distribution and commercialisation, and exchange of local knowledge and practices;
- Women's access to land, seeds, water, primary materials and all necessary support for production and commercialisation in agriculture, fishing, livestock rearing and handicraft.
- The reorganisation of domestic and care work so that the responsibility for this work is shared equally between men and women within a family or community. For this to become a reality, we demand the adoption of public policies for the support of social reproduction (such as crèches, collective laundries and restaurants, care for the elderly, etc), as well as a reduction in working hours without cuts in salaries.

### **And we commit ourselves to:**

- Construct or strengthen alliances with trade union movements;
- Highlight and denounce the exploitation and rights of female and male migrant workers, of domestic workers, and of home-based subcontracted workers;
- Denounce the role of transnational companies in the exploitation of women's work, by, for example, organising a campaign to boycott the products of these companies (together with women workers so that boycotts are used for the negotiation of better working conditions);
- Challenge the sexual division of labour, the naturalisation of women's work in the domestic sphere, and the valorisation of productive work over reproductive work, in this way creating the conditions necessary for women to have more free time for leisure or participation in community life.