

Socialist Women Speak Out

In today's world women are playing increasingly indispensable roles in international, national and household economies, but they still have a disadvantaged economic position compared to men.

The new opportunities offered by globalization will not be fostered if women, new actors on the world scene, do not play key roles in the economy, in social and political life and in the family. The Beijing Conference stressed the growing awareness of the leading role of women and declared that women's rights are human rights. A new balance of power and resources is needed if we want to prevent the new autonomy and freedom from resulting in worsening conditions for women and quality of life for all.

The rise of neoliberalism and the free market philosophy which see society, both domestic and international, primarily as a market, where everyone is both a producer and a consumer, pose a direct threat to equality and social justice. A deregulated market economy which has no regard for social or environmental concerns cannot promote global economic and social well-being and will fail to protect the environment and to ensure sustainable development. Neoliberalism increasingly threatens women's hard-won rights, particularly the right to education, to gainful employment and to health. Neoliberalism likewise results in the weakening of people's democratic gains as states continue to give political concessions in the pursuit of more foreign investment.

Today, globalization is being led by a few hundred transnational corporations, which have economies larger than many national economies. Not subject to national regulation, these increasingly important transnational corporations disregard human and labor rights and the environment in their quest for higher profits. More and more they are shaping global work, finance, consump-

tion and culture. Rarely do women play any role in their decision-making, but often women are their victims.

In both the developing and developed world there is growing poverty; the gap between rich and poor continues to increase, both between countries and within countries. Most of the poor are women as they are the primary victims of exploitation and marginalization and educating and training women and girls especially in non-traditional work is the key to their economic development. Targeting resources at women by recognizing their right to health, education and training, by giving them full access to economic resources, and promoting gender balance in decision-making, is essential in order to overcome poverty.

The Euro-Mediterranean initiative which was launched in Barcelona in 1995 is an economic forum which, in order to be equal to competition with other blocks, must work for a greater involvement of women. They constitute indisputable human and economic capital which must be judiciously mobilized.

In Africa, women produce around 80 percent of the food and constitute more than half of small-scale farmers and provide about three-quarters of the work force in food production and processing. But women still lack access to land. Without secure land ownership rights, they are unable to obtain credit and support for production.

In Algeria and in countries where there is war, violence and extremism of any sort, women are the primary victims of atrocities. The very heavy economic consequences lead to unacceptable levels of distress and poverty. Structural adjustment imposed on certain countries by international institutions (IMF etc.), the harsh transition to an "unregulated" market economy instead of a "social" market economy, add their disastrous effects to the situation.

In Asia and Latin America the dominance of neoliberal policies has led to a burgeoning informal sector, dominated by women and children, where flexible working practices are largely unprotected by labor and health regulations. So-called efficiency and profit are pursued at enormous social cost.

In many developing countries, where there is an acute shortage of gainful employment opportunities, millions of women opt for migrant work, particularly in areas that make them more vulnerable to emotional, psychological, physical and sexual violence. While these women significantly help their countries' economies, they are not only blamed for the social costs of migration but are also largely left unprotected.

Deregulation and privatization may increase efficiency in the production of goods and services, but also increase the risk of poverty. In much of the developed world, structural unemployment affects women in particular and they constitute the majority of low-paid, temporary and part-time workers and the long-term unemployed. In the former centrally-planned economies, the transition to market economies has had a disproportionately negative impact on women, in terms of conditions of life and of higher-rate and longer-term unemployment. Unemployment is not only a macroeconomic problem. The unemployed lose not only their means of support but also part of their humanity and identity. Salaries are still often determined by gender rather than skills required for the job, resulting in unequal pay for equal work. Women's skills are a necessary resource for economic growth and development. Women must therefore be fully integrated into the labor market without any discrimination, with such integration requiring adequate labor and social policies and investment of public and private resources in every field.

Institutions of the social state

have become objects of attack and in many countries have been swept away by market ideology. Often, behind the need for an austerity program, there lies an ideological antagonism to the welfare state. The cutting of government subsidies and social welfare provisions has hit women the hardest, making it more difficult for them to escape poverty. The provision of education, housing, health care and child care lessens the economic burden on women and assists their economic independence.

The old social state was based on a patriarchal model. A new welfare state must now take into account the new conditions of the world economy and labor market, the changed role of women, the growing presence of immigrants, the need to include men in family responsibilities etc. Social rights should belong to the individual citizen and not be derived from family status. Active policies that provide women and men with increased choices for work and family life must be implemented in both public and private sectors.

Child labor is a product of poverty and is a global problem. UNICEF estimates that there are 250 million children working worldwide, many in the sex trade and in bonded labor. Employers exploit children who represent cheap labor, often in hazardous conditions akin to slavery. Of particular interest is the phenomenon of feminization of child labor which is becoming increasingly evident. We cannot wait for poverty to end before child labor is eliminated.

Socialists and social democrats must face the challenge of the interdependence of the modern world and offer a competing vision of globalization which focuses on markets serving people and on the distribution of the world's resources based on justice. Building a new contract between the genders must be a fundamental pillar of this challenge. Only in this way can socialists and social democrats undertake collective

responsibility to ensure that globalization becomes an instrument of development, peace and democracy.

Socialist International Women urgently calls on the trade union movement, both at national and international levels, to actively work for the protection of the rights of those victimized by migrant, informal and flexible work. The eradication of child labor should also be among the movement's priorities.

SIW calls on states to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Migrant Women Workers and their Families and to fulfill their commitments as enshrined in the documents of UN conferences such as the Fourth World Conference on Women, the World Summit on Social Development, the International Conference on Population and Development and the Conference on Human Rights. SIW calls for collective political action at different levels: supranational, national, local, etc.

- a) to adopt gender-sensitive policies and programs of economic and social development at national and international level;
- b) to balance inequality, injustice and insecurity produced by neoliberal policies reinforcing social rights and fighting rights and fighting against social exclusion;
- d) to develop new and wider public policies to ensure conditions of equity, equal opportunities and social cohesion;
- e) to consolidate democracy and women's equal participation in decision-making using quotas which have proved to be an effective means of promoting equality;
- f) to regulate transnational corporations to ensure the protection of labor rights and human rights, including explicitly women's rights;
- g) to pursue international coordination of national economic policies in order to create new jobs and to uphold and protect workers' rights;
- h) to promote growth and employment, while enhancing sustainable

development and the protection of the environment;

i) to design, implement and monitor effective legislation, codes, social security regulations, so as to ensure worldwide minimum standards of pay, working hours, labor rights and to end child labor;

j) to promote economic policies to improve the employment and income of women in the formal and informal sectors and to ensure equal pay for equal work;

k) to give women full and equal access to economic resources, to credit and the right to own land and to inherit;

l) to restructure and target the allocation of public expenditure to promote women's economic opportunities to education, training, the sciences and new technologies;

m) to ensure that structural adjustment programs do not lead to a reduction in education, training or health programs and are based on advancing gender equality and the recognition of women's economic contribution;

n) to provide free and compulsory education for children;

o) to give women full and equal access to education and training;

p) to stimulate and assist fertility-management programs in order that women can secure their reproductive rights;

q) to promote and develop the means by which women communicate and share information throughout the world, and within countries, in particular in impoverished countries.

Only solidarity among women will ensure that globalization of the economy will promote social rights, conflict prevention and economic and social justice.

Resolution of the Socialist International Women Bureau Meeting, 18-19 January 1997 in Rome, Italy.