

Research Article

Women and Work: A Feminist Overview of Women's Undermined Labour and Its Intersection with Capitalism

Rahul Kapoor

PhD Scholar, Sarojini Naidu Centre for Women's Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi
Email id: rahul.rstv@gmail.com

Date of Submission: 06/05/2020; Date of Acceptance: 30/07/2020

ABSTRACT

The two-thirds of the entire work in the world is done by women, and still they are neither paid nor valued for the majority of the work which they do, instead they are deemed as non-working housewives. This not only undermines the work which they do in the household but also lays the foundation of a continuous cycle of exploitation of their labour in the house as well as outside it by linking the work which they do with their gender roles in the society (Mies, 1981). Women are 'overexploited' at their workplace and 'overworked' in comparison to men owing to their paid as well as non-paid labour which they do in the household. Capitalism uses patriarchy to appropriate its unequal wages and overexploitation of women workers by deeming the work they do as less productive than men, a distinction that has been created by the patriarchal genders roles and the gender division of labour in the household. Capitalists use a large pool of women workers as cheap labour whom they can lay off conveniently as per the market demands and also use their low wages to justify the overall decrease in pay rates. Women were oppressed in pre capitalist societies also but the advent of capitalism has aggravated their exploitation for the purpose of maximising profits (Comanne, 2017).

Keywords: Capitalism, Feminism, Labour, Patriarchy, Women, Work

INTRODUCTION

According to Bhasin and Khan (1999), "Feminism is an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression at the material and ideological levels of women's

labour, fertility and sexuality, in the family, at the place of work and in society in general, and conscious action by women and men to transform the present situation.” They further added that feminism is a continuous fight for the rights, freedom and dignity of women so that women can exercise a complete control over their lives within the household as well as in the public sphere which includes their work place and all other public spaces.

Capitalism is a free market economy system in which the means of production which include land, labour, capital and other resources are controlled by private entities to produce goods and services with an aim to garner maximum profits (Amadeo, 2019; Kelly, 2018). “To say that, within the present system of power, either patriarchy or capitalism causes the other is to fail to understand their present mutually reinforcing system and dialectical relationship, a relationship which must be understood if the structure of oppression is to be changed.” (Eisenstein, 1999). Hart (2016) posited a close relationship between capitalism and patriarchy with patriarchy being the historical system of oppression which needed to be revisited in the context of capitalism as its contemporary assertion.

The beginning of the current millennium saw a new thrust on women’s rights and empowerment when the government of India declared the year 2001 as the, ‘Women’s Empowerment Year’ with a vision to achieve political, social and economic equality for women and simultaneously ushered in policies to encourage the participation of women in the economic activities of the nation along with ensuring equal access to quality education, fair remuneration and other workplace benefits to grant women an equal status with men in the work arena. The legal mechanisms were also strengthened with a focus to end all forms of oppression and discrimination faced by women at their work place and also in the society at large (Nagindrappa and Radhika, 2013).

The many problems faced by developing countries like unemployment, lack of access to education and poverty are more prevalent in women owing to their historically oppressed status in the society and as a result they are more severely affected by these issues and are deprived of financial resources which control various aspects of the society we live in. Therefore, even after the constitutional and affirmative legislations which grant women an equal status with men in the eyes of the law, the actual rights and guarantees enjoyed by women are far less than what has been promised to them (Bhuyan and Panigrahy, 2006).

FEMINIST UNDERSTANDING OF WOMEN AND WORK

The two-thirds of the entire work in the world is done by women, and still they are neither paid nor valued for the majority of the work which they do, instead they are

deemed as non-working housewives. This not only undermines the work which they do in the household but also lays the foundation of a continuous cycle of exploitation of their labour in the house as well as outside it by linking the work which they do with their gender roles in the society. Historically, women's work has often been kept away from economic recognition by generalising all women as housewives and all men as earning members of their families even when women's work in the household is productive and has significant economic value (Mies, 1981).

Friedan (1963), a catalyst for the second wave of feminism in America, challenged the notion that educated middle-class women in America were happy with their work within the household and found absolute pleasure in child rearing and fulfilling their domestic responsibilities. She also criticised the media of that time which was mostly headed by men for developing such notions and stereotypes about women in the society. She found that most women were unhappy with their confined identity of a housewife and wanted to explore the public sphere and get into paid employment so that they can use their cognitive abilities and achieve satisfaction from it. She also criticised the educational practices of that time which were developed for women as they focused only on specific subjects which were considered to be suitable for women in the functionalist realm and these included marriage and care giving.

Beauvoir (1953) posited that women's entry into the formal economy and achieving financial independence was way more crucial for them than any of their other rights. She also highlighted that even in paid employment women will face more problems than their men colleagues who would enjoy an upper hand in the work place too because of the subordinate gender roles of women in the household and the perception about their sexuality.

Gender Division of Labour

The division of work between men and women based on their gender roles in the society is termed as Gender Division of Labour. This work does not specifically refer to only paid employment but also to the general chores and tasks which men and women perform in their everyday lives. However, the gendered division of labour also determines certain jobs which are considered fit for the women in the labour market creating a particular pattern for the women workforce. Gender division of labour is a social construct as it is associated with gender roles in the society which are socially and culturally determined with an inherent patriarchal basis. The work areas pertaining to paid employment are separated along gender lines where men are in majority in some occupations while women are in majority in others. The education and service sector is predominantly occupied by women while men occupy various positions of work in manufacturing and electronics (ILO, 2008).

This division of labour between men and women has its origin in the manner in which nature has been appropriated by capitalist patriarchy in order to produce and sustain hierarchical and unequal relations between men and women in the household and in the society. Women are considered closer to nature and their work in the family is seen as an extension of their body as they have a uterus and can give birth to a baby. The work they do in child rearing and the labour they go through while giving birth to a child is not considered as a human activity but rather as an act of nature. This concept of women being seen as nature or close to nature as both are mothers, one is 'mother earth' and the other is the mother of a child, leads to a dominant and exploitative relationship between men and women in which men as human beings exploit women as nature (Mies, 1986).

In the capitalist patriarchy, only men's labour that is used for earning profits is referred to as productive work while women's work in the household is deemed as unproductive and they are tagged as housewives. Thus, patriarchy in the household is a precondition for capitalism to thrive, as women's unpaid labour in the household and their role in the reproduction of life enable men to carry out their work in the capitalist market. The asymmetric and hierarchical relations between men and women due to gender division of labour are not only confined to the family but form the basis of a structural problem which extends to the society as a whole (Mies, 1986).

The gender division of labour also leads to 'occupational segregation' which has both vertical and horizontal dimensions. Horizontal segregation refers to the manner in which men and women work in different areas of employment. Women often find themselves in occupations which are inherently exploitative, sexist and have little scope of career growth like the customer service and caregiving profession. Vertical segregation means the various positions which men and women occupy in the same profession or sector. There is often a hierarchy in these positions and men occupy the positions which are at the top of the hierarchy while women occupy the lower positions and consequently also get lower salaries and incentives. In the corporate sector, women are likely to occupy only 5% of the jobs which are at the top of the hierarchy of any profession. The gender division of labour evolves with time, market forces and the socio-political economy but often ends up being oppressive towards the women (ILO, 2008).

Rettler (1992) posited that 50 percent of the women workforce engaged in the formal economy in America were present in occupations where the majority of the work force were women. These included jobs of secretaries where 98% of the work force were women, nurses and caregivers where 88% of the total workforce were women, waitresses where 80% of the total workforce were women and school

teachers were 82% of the total teachers included women. She found that there was a clear demarcation between professions which were predominantly occupied by women and those where the men workers were more in numbers. Women were still working in areas which were stereotypically considered as 'women's work' adhering to the gender roles of women in the society and included professions like nursing, teaching, hospitality, customer service and sewing machine operators. She found that even though majority of the workforce working in such professions were women, the problems which women had to face in these professions were immense ranging from low wages, hostile work environment and absence of incentives. She concluded that the scope of improvement in these professions to allow their women workers to benefit from them was immense.

The gender division of labour in the family affects the social, economic and psychological well-being of women as their work in the household ends up determining the time they can give to paid employment, the kind of jobs they get and also the wages they earn. Women in paid employment bear the brunt of their additional responsibilities in the family which includes fulfilling the role of a caregiver in the family. The traditional gender roles exempt the men from undertaking any domestic work and hence the work in the household which is exclusive to women affects their mental health especially when they undertake this work along with salaried employment (Calasanti and Bailey, 1991). Agarwal (1994) corroborated this view and opined that it becomes difficult for women to keep their career and married life separate as they get exhausted managing their domestic chores and workplace responsibilities. This affects their life in a negative manner and also hampers their career progress.

Nair and Percot (2007) pointed out that nurses in India chose their profession in the context of their families and undertake various phases of migration. Their work domain takes into account their private sphere of life and is interlinked with their marriage and child rearing roles. They are often required to leave their hometowns for their jobs and therefore they also have to undertake continuous negotiations within the family and at the workplace to craft a middle ground.

Bushan (2017) found that many women opted for the teaching profession in India as it allowed them enough time to adhere to their domestic roles in the society and therefore considered the profession appropriate for women. She posited this as the double burden faced by the 'women professional' as they have to work both within the family and at the workplace and therefore need additional mental and physical strength to fulfil these dual responsibilities. She further added that apart from the double burden of work, women employees face several hurdles at their workplace too which includes unequal wages, promotions, non-conducive work environment

for their career advancement and stereotyping of the professions where women workers are in majority.

FEMINISATION OF LABOUR

Feminisation of labour is a two-dimensional phenomenon, which refers to the increase in the participation of women in paid labour and other economic activities since the early 1980s. Globally, around 70% of the women in the age group 20-54 are into paid employment, however, in developing nations as a group 60% of the women in the same age group are in paid work which is 10% less than the global average. The feminisation of labour has come along with a gradual shift in the nature of paid work for women which has moved from the agriculture and manufacturing sectors towards the service sector across the globe (United Nations, 1999). Globally, the service sector now employs the highest number of women and has overtaken the agriculture sector where the majority of the women workforce was situated before. In fact, more than half of the world's women in paid employment work in the service sector. In the period from 1995 to 2014, women's participation in paid work in the service sector increased from 41.1% to 61.5% (ILO, 2015).

Globally, 345 million women have joined paid employment during the period 1993-2013 and comprise 40% of the global workforce. In the context of feminisation of labour, it becomes important to note that while women's participation in paid work has increased during the period 1993-2013, the share of men in paid employment for the same period has come down. However, still the overall participation of women in paid work is far less than the participation of men, the gender gap is the highest in South Asia when it comes to participation of women in paid employment as compared to men with only 30.5% women participating in paid work but even in countries where there is no gender gap in participation in the labour force, the distribution of jobs in terms of quality and wages reflect gender biases and patriarchal norms (Chaudhary and Verick, 2014). In India too, the situation is grim as the participation of women in paid employment has declined from 57% to 44% in rural areas while in urban areas it has remained stagnant at around 26-28% during the period 1987-2011 (Klasen, 2017).

The second aspect of the feminisation of labour is the introduction of flexible forms of paid employments which include working from home, work in the informal sector, contractual and part time work, all of which have allowed more women to become a part of the paid work force but at the same time have also increased the vulnerability and exploitation of the women's labour. The feminisation of labour is also a product of the neoliberal economic policies associated with free market trade that demand cheap and easy labour and have opened the doors to major changes in forms of paid

work making them more flexible and exploitative at the same time (Akorsu, 2016). Razavi, Arza, Braunstein, Cook and Goulding (2012) opined that globalisation and free market policies often end up exploiting the women work force more as the negative outcomes of such policies are never equally shared and it is women in both formal and informal paid work who bear the majority of the brunt of such outcomes.

Women are still trapped in the clutches of patriarchal gender roles which limit their access to quality education, skill development programs and even material resources as a result of which even with feminisation of labour, women continue to remain at a lower pedestal in paid employments. The control of men over job opportunities and higher positions in paid employment is another reason that makes women disadvantaged in the labour market. Their lack of access to various tools of development and empowerment hamper their productive labour and strengthen the various stereotypes about them by portraying them as less resourceful and less productive than men (Kanji and Sen, 2001).

Women have become a strategic pool of paid workers in the neoliberal economy who are preferred by the capitalists as they find it convenient to exploit their physical and emotional labour (Morini, 2007). In fact, one of the reasons for less remuneration of women than men is that they readily accept this inequality to improve their micro life situations and thus capitalists conveniently replace men with women workers in exploitative labour. Women's upbringing and gendered status in the society prevent them from either knowing about their rights or fighting for them, a situation of which the capitalists take complete advantage. Feminisation of labour, therefore is a complex concept which emerges from the social, cultural and economic context and has various social and economic ramifications for women (Standing, 1999). Quast (2011) reported on the consequences of feminisation of labour and opined that, "women are currently juggling full-time careers, managing household chores and child rearing duties, as well as taking care of aging parents, thus greatly increasing their level of daily stress compared to women of previous generations."

The International Women's Conference in Mexico held in the year 1975 focused for the first time on integration of women in development but this pitch was used by the capitalists in the developing countries to hire women as cheap and timid labour who can be easily manipulated and exploited for the surplus production process (Mies, 1986). Akorsu (2016) pointed out that women in paid employment continue to struggle because of the monopoly of the capitalists as well as the patriarchal labour unions which emanate from a patriarchal society. She opined that women claiming their space in the otherwise men dominated trade unions could help them in their struggle against the global capitalists.

Structural adjustment programmes in various countries which paved way for the neo liberal economic policy has led to the feminisation of labour but there has also been a sectoral shift in the availability of paid work for women along with a lower standing of paid employments which have been accessible to them. The women workers have been compelled to join the informal sector to support the financial needs of their family, and as per UNICEF, have been subjected to 'invisible adjustment' (ILO, 1998). The structural adjustment programme was also responsible for causing feminisation of poverty which in turn led to the feminisation of labour, specifically in the informal sector (Wennerholm, 2002).

The number of women in commercial sex work also increased in Southeast Asian as well as other developing nations along with feminisation of labour and the structural adjustment programme. Women also had to join paid work which was flexible in nature like work from home or part time work and therefore experienced limited job stability, less or no incentives, absence of non-salaried benefits and absence of their work from the purview of labour laws. Women from Asian countries also joined paid work globally through legal and illegal means and became nurses, domestic workers, sex workers, waitresses and joined other forms of low paid and unorganised work. Feminisation of labour in Asian countries has clearly led them to depend on, 'comparative advantage of women's disadvantages' (ILO, 1998). Scott (1994) termed the informal sector as the 'female sector' owing to the high concentration of women workers in the sector. Similarly, Standing (1999) posited a direct positive relation between feminisation of labour and casualisation of workers.

The number of women in paid work around the globe has increased, yet the occupational segregation and the wage gap between men and women in the favour of men workforce remains significant. Women have been compelled by household and financial compulsions to enter paid labour and work on exploitative terms. Thus, the rise in women workforce has come along with an increase in their participation in informal and insecure economic activities. Their work in paid labour has also not affected their work hours at home, where they still continue to do the majority of the unpaid household work. Thus, free market economy perpetuates the gender inequality in the society as it is also a reflection of the larger social structure within which the labour markets function (Razavi *et al.*, 2012).

Feminisation of labour has often been used to posit arguments in favour of globalisation and privatisation but it is an argument which needs to be revisited as the status and situation of women in paid work has not improved much and in fact in many cases has only deteriorated. Feminisation of labour is not a uniformly distributed phenomenon as it occurred mainly in developed nations and participation of women in paid labour

increased unevenly in various industries. In India, feminisation of labour was rather short lived and it was followed by a 'defeminisation of labour' which means a decrease in the participation of women in paid labour, it also describes the exploitative and dehumanising work conditions of women workers in paid labour. They become susceptible to discrimination and sexual harassment at work place because of lack of implementation of labour laws and absence of labour unions. Women workers in paid work are often found at the lowest level of hierarchy and are kept unorganised and casualized as a management strategy to exploit their labour to the fullest and deny them any form of social protection or welfare measures like maternity leaves, paid leaves, space for child care at the workplace and transport facilities (Prasad, 2018).

CAPITALISM AND WOMEN'S WORK

The term capitalist patriarchy is used to describe an interdependent and mutually reinforcing relationship between a society dominated by the men and the capitalist class structure. The labelling of women as a reproductive or sexual class lays the foundation of capitalism which then oppresses and excludes women in the public sphere based on this labelling. True equality between men and women would end up destroying the patriarchal relations between men and women which are necessary for the thriving of a capitalist society (Eisenstein, 1999).

Mies (1986) used the term capitalist patriarchy to refer to an overarching system which enforces oppression and exploitation of women. She opined that, "whereas the concept patriarchy denotes the historical depth of women's exploitation and oppression, the concept capitalism is expressive of the contemporary manifestation, or the latest development of this system. Women's problems today cannot be explained by merely referring to the old forms of patriarchal dominance." She posited that capitalism cannot exist without patriarchy and that surplus production and profit maximization will only happen if the patriarchal relations between men and women are preserved or reproduced. She opined that since capitalism has its founding base in patriarchy, it is important to discuss both of them as one closely woven and interdependent system responsible for the oppression and exploitation of women in the society. She opined that it is imperative for feminism to fight against all the relations which emerge from capitalist patriarchy to achieve its true purpose.

Class and gender are not mutually exclusive categories of analysis but are associated with each other and hence the nature of work which women get in the labour market is determined jointly by the patriarchal ideology and capitalist forces (Kalpagam, 1994). Gray (1971) opined that, emancipation of women cannot be achieved without challenging or at least investigating the interplay of capitalist forces with the condition

of women in the society. She stated that, “Capitalism, which rarely requires full employment, cannot use increasing numbers of women workers. Capitalism, which needs to compensate for cyclical unemployment, systematically disuses women workers.”

Women are ‘overexploited’ at their workplace and ‘overworked’ in comparison to men owing to their paid as well as non-paid labour which they do in the household. Capitalism uses patriarchy to appropriate its unequal wages and overexploitation of women workers by deeming the work they do as less productive than men, a distinction that has been created by the patriarchal gender roles and the gender division of labour in the household. Women with equal qualifications and putting equal hours at work are paid at least 20% less than the men workers. Capitalists use large pool of women workers as cheap labour whom they can lay off conveniently as per the market demands and also use their low wages to justify the overall decrease in pay rates. Women were oppressed in pre-capitalistic societies also but the advent of capitalism has aggravated their exploitation for the purpose of maximising profits (Comanée, 2017). Capitalists continuously search for new markets for selling their surplus production and gaining access to new pools of labour to exploit, women also form a major part of this labour force who eventually get exploited (Luxemburg, 1951).

‘The Long Friday’ till date remains a significant day in the lives of both men and women from Iceland because on October 24th, 1975 which happened to be a Friday, almost 90% of the women in Iceland went on a strike and refused to work both within the family and outside it to highlight the economic relevance of their unpaid and paid labour. Schools had to be closed due to the lack of teachers while flights got cancelled due to absence of air hostesses from work. The secretarial work had to be performed by senior managers and directors while men had to take their children to the workplace where they took care of them. The impact of the strike was felt within a year as the Iceland parliament passed a law ensuring equal pay for men and women at the workplace (Clausen, 2016).

Capitalism has freed men from the clutches of feudalism but women still work like feudal slaves at home. Capitalists exploit and oppress men at the workplace who in turn displace their negative emotions in the family and oppress their wives. Women who engage in paid labour outside the family are clubbed into ‘pink collar’ jobs like teaching and nursing where they get low wages. Women also have to fight the hegemony of men at the workplace as they often try to extend the household inequality in the domain of paid work. Capitalism is responsible for creating an unequal economic relationship between men and women which in turn affects all

other aspects of their life (Wolff, 2018). Capitalism has its roots in the oppression of one class over the other and various faces of oppression such as racism, sexism and homophobia help in maintaining the status quo of capitalists in which a select and privileged few rule over the rest (Smith, 2015).

Capitalists have relied on the 'divide and rule' strategy based on race and gender to achieve their purpose of exploiting the working class in its entirety. They have treated women as a reserve labour force who would pitch in to work when the availability of men engaging in paid labour would be less, especially during times of war and other conflict situations. In many European countries, the world war one brought with it, the employment of a huge number of women in domestic as well as other services and industries. The strict gender division of labour forged by capitalism aggravated the inequalities which women had to face both within the family and at the work place. Capitalism makes the struggle of women in paid labour multifaceted as they have to fight for the emancipation of their class and their own emancipation as women (Humphries, 2002).

Sexual violence against women is yet another manifestation of capitalism. Those in powerful positions at the workplace find it easier to overpower or force women to have sex with them and therefore it becomes important to revisit the understanding of sexual violence against women as not just an individual phenomena but as a by-product of the capitalist system. "Capitalism relies not only on the alienation of labour and explicit discrimination, it also produces personal alienation and the suppression of sexuality. In the absence of class and social struggle on a mass basis, individual people develop themselves in the 'dog eat dog' mentality that the system produces" (Smith, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Feminism and capitalism have always been at logger heads as feminism acknowledges and celebrates the existence of women as human beings while capitalism treats them as property or a commodity (Solnit, 2018). Capitalism has exploited women's labour in the market, way beyond than just unequal wages. It has developed a false notion that women lie about the sexual violence perpetrated against them. It has also tried to engulf the feminist movement by deeming it as either redundant or an ally of the capitalist system and still the feminist movement has evolved and found ways to fight the neoliberal system. The struggle of feminists for formulation of concrete laws against sexual harassment at work place is one of the many ways in which contemporary feminists are fighting the menace of the capitalist system. They have also used the workplace as a site of mobilisation and unionisation of women against gender discrimination (Grosser and McCarthy, 2019).

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How to cite this article: Kapoor, R. (2020) 'Women and Work: A Feminist Overview of Women's Undermined Labour and Its Intersection with Capitalism', *Journal of Exclusion Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 177-189.