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Vijay Prashad

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## Women Everywhere in the World Are Squeezed into a Tight Corner: The Twenty-Seventh Newsletter (2021)



Sandra Elea (Panama), *La servidumbre*, 1978-79.

Between 30 June and 2 July 2021, the United Nations and other multilateral organisations held the Generation Equality Forum in Paris (France). The forum was held to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#) set out at the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995). Re-reading the Beijing Platform shows that rather than advance the cause of justice and equality, many countries have slipped backwards. Critical areas of concern to be addressed included the following:

- The burden of poverty on women.
- Inequalities and inadequacies in access to education, training, healthcare, employment, and decision-making.
- Violence against women, including the grave dangers for women in armed conflict.
- Lack of respect for women as well as inadequate promotion and protection of women's human rights.
- Persistent discrimination against and violations of the rights of the girl child.
- Insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women.

As part of the forum held in Paris last week, a group of agencies – including the World Health Organisation (WHO) – released a set of twelve [papers](#) that considered developments in the past twenty-five years, with an emphasis on the social impact of the pandemic. The lead paper [notes](#) that it ‘is disheartening that still not one country can claim to have achieved gender equality’. Furthermore, ‘the COVID-19 pandemic has been a serious setback for gender equality and women's health’. Some key requirements for a way forward emerge out of these twelve papers:

1. ‘The first requirement is that paid employment and unpaid care work are valued equally, recognising the fact that many women are not employed or work in informal sectors and that women bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work’.
2. Universal coverage for healthcare is necessary, with comprehensive sexual and reproductive healthcare included in the coverage.
3. Universal social protections should include provisions for childcare, paid parental, sick, and family care leave, and a pension for the elderly.
4. Women's movements must be supported, and women must participate fully in the construction of policies in all sectors of society. Reflecting on the role of women in politics and government, the head of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, [told](#) the forum, ‘Women make up one quarter of those who are managers, they are one quarter of parliamentarians around the world, they are one quarter of those who negotiate climate change, they are less than one quarter of those who negotiate peace agreements. All these decisions have a fundamental impact on their capacity to have a life that is meaningful’.



Olga Rozanova (Russia), *In the Street*, 1915.

Last year, in a major [report](#), UN Women concluded that the gains made over the past quarter century have been eroded. The main drivers of this reversal are a combination of the climate emergency, cruel austerity policies, conflict, violence, the ‘rise of exclusionary politics, characterised by misogyny and xenophobia’, the entire care economy being held up by women, and other factors. These reasons are now compounded by the pandemic, which – as our [study](#) *CoronaShock and Patriarchy* showed – has hit women very hard.

Of the many important points, here are some to consider:

1. 510 million women around the world – about 40% of all working women – are [employed](#) in the sectors hit hardest by the pandemic, [such as](#) entertainment, food service, hospitality, manufacturing, and tourism.

2. Women are disproportionately found in the [informal](#) sector (60%), where they do not receive social and economic protections.
3. Women have been [more likely](#) than men to lose their jobs during the pandemic.
4. During the pandemic, at least 64 million women [lost](#) their jobs, with an income decline of at least \$800 billion. This does not include women in the informal sector, which is the main arena for working women in southern Asia and in Africa.
5. Studies from around the world show that women had to cut back on their hours of employment due to increased care obligations during the pandemic and that these cuts impact long-term pay and pensions. This also impacts the ability of women to return to work and often results in a greater increase in care work in the long term. Furthermore, as the International Labour Organisation [points out](#), ‘women are not only hit by the loss of jobs but also by expenditure cuts that contract public service provision, in particular care services’.
6. A [survey](#) by UNAIDS found that 47% of LGBTQIA+ respondents faced economic difficulty, with ‘a quarter unable to meet their basic needs, skipping meals, or reducing meal sizes’.



Aurora Reyes Flores (Mexico), *Escena revolucionaria*, 1935.

Hidden in the shadows of these reports are the realities of women who live in rural areas. In India, for instance, rural women [make up](#) 81.29% of the female workforce, but only 12.9% of women [hold](#) land. Most of these women are landless agricultural workers or

informal sector workers. During the most recent wave of the pandemic to strike India, 5.7 million rural women's jobs [vanished](#) in April 2021; this job loss accounts for nearly 80% of all job losses that month. Recoveries in May were anaemic. The Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research [dossier](#) on the farmers' revolt is important reading for the context of the crisis in rural India. Nikore Associates, based in Delhi, [offered](#) four reasons for the crisis experienced by rural women:

1. In rural India, before the pandemic, women [spent](#) 5.017 hours per day on unpaid care work; in comparison, men spent 1.67 hours per day. During the pandemic, as family members fell ill, the compulsion of care work fell on the shoulders of women.
2. Due to the lockdowns and other pressures, women – who supplemented their incomes by trading goods and agricultural produce, including selling fish – found it difficult to go to the markets.
3. Women had been important beneficiaries of the government's rural work scheme (MNREGA), which saw an almost 35% reduction in the government's 2020-21 [budget](#). In April-May 2021, jobs provided through this scheme fell by 21%.
4. Women who worked in the handicraft and small industries sector – including through piece-rate and home-based production – saw the sector stutter during the second wave and fail to make any recovery in the months since then.





Colette Omogbai (Nigeria), *Agony*, 1963.

At the Paris meeting, UN Women's Mlambo-Ngcuka [said](#), 'Women everywhere in the world are squeezed into a small corner'. But they are, of course, fighting back. Across the world, trade unions and agricultural unions, women's organisations and human rights groups, as well as political parties of the Left are pushing back, stepping out of the corner, and seeking to put the agenda of working women on the table. The demands being made are basic. Eighteen of them are at the end of *CoronaShock and Patriarchy* [study](#). Here is a summary, condensed into eight demands:

1. Nominate leaders of working-class women's organisations to influential bodies that shape policy.
2. Recognise and count informal women workers in national accounts.
3. Ensure that informal workers have basic workplace protections.
4. Provide immediate cash relief and food relief to women workers.

5. Provide immediate healthcare coverage to all workers.
6. Place a moratorium on rent and utilities payments.
7. Enhance social protection systems, including child and elder care programmes.
8. Provide credit to women's cooperatives.



In 1995, the delegates elected Chen Muhua (1921-2011) as the president of the UN World Conference on Women. In 1938, Chen went to Yan'an to join the communist revolution, studying at Kàngda and helping to build the economic resilience of the base areas. After 1949, Chen worked in the Communist Party (rising to be an alternate Politburo member), in the Chinese state (becoming the governor of the People's Bank of China), and in the women's movement (leading the All-China Women's Federation). At the Beijing Conference, Chen made a strong [plea](#) for the emancipation of women. 'It is evident that women are crying out for an improvement in their status. The times demand it. Humanity aspires to it'.

Warmly,

Vijay 09.07.2021