

STUDIES | Feminisms n°1

**Women
of Struggle,
Women
in Struggle.**



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March 2019



A women's march in Argentina as part of the Ni Una Menos ('Not one less') movement that has mobilised on themes including gender-based violence, abortion, reproductive rights, femicide, and the gender wage gap, 2018.
Bárbara Leiva / Patria Grande

Lenin announced in 1918 that the experience of all liberation movements attests to the fact that the success of a revolution is dependent on the level of women's participation. Over a century later, this statement continues to tell the story of the women who have built revolutionary movements and movements of resistance to neoliberalism and – most recently – to reactionary populism.

The inspiration of the October 1917 Russian Revolution arrived early in the colonised agrarian continents of the Global South; it raised the hope that the working majority could defeat the exploiting minority. This belief motivated popular struggles and stimulated political organisations around the world. National liberation struggles emerged in Africa and Asia during the 20th century, while the capitalist economies in Latin America experienced the contradictions of dependent growth and saw the rise of their own resistance movements. Women played a crucial role in all of these struggles.

In a time of resistance against an aggressive assault of conservative neoliberalism, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research offers its first publication of *Women of Struggle, Women in Struggle*. This is an introductory analysis of women's struggles on the continents of

Africa, Asia, and America. The policies of neoliberalism and neofascism put immense pressure on women, who become the primary and principal targets of precariousness, oppression, and exploitation.

In this series, *Women of Struggle*, *Women in Struggle*, we will present the stories of women in struggle who contributed not only to the wider arena of politics, but in particular those who pioneered the establishment of women's organisations, opening up paths of feminist resistance and struggle throughout the 20th century.

It is the task of militants to study the diverse theories of the organisational methods of these women, not only to better understand their political contributions, but also to inspire us as we build our own necessary organisations to fight against oppression and exploitation today.

Women and Inequality

The world that we live in today is characterised by great social and political upheavals – especially in the Global South, with workers facing overwhelming attacks from neoliberal politics. Political and social movements work hard to resist the impact of political fragmentation, economic precariousness, and the depletion of the capacity for social reproduction.



This upheaval is part of the recent structural crisis of capitalism, as its contradictions clash to a deadly crescendo. Contradictions in politics, ecology, and social reproduction shake the foundations of the economy, which seeks to restore its strength through non-economic relations. As Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser explain, ‘Behind capitalism’s official institutions – wage labour, production, exchange, and finance – stand their necessary supports and enabling conditions: families, communities, nature; territorial states, political organisations, and civil societies; and not least of all, massive amounts and multiple forms of unwaged and expropriated labour, including much of the work of social reproduction, still performed largely by women and often uncompensated’ (2019, p. 64).

Taking these challenges – and collapses – as a starting point for a new financialised economy, these contradictions appear as consequences of problems that do not seem easy to solve – such as the unprecedented increase in inequality on a global level. As the latest Oxfam report (2020) shows, in addition to maintaining the gap between the incomes of men and women, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small number of people and corporations has reached record levels. The wealth of the richest 1% of the world’s population is more than double the wealth accumulated by 6.9 billion people – that is, 92% of the world population – while the 22 richest men in the world have more

money than all of the more than 667 million women in Africa combined.

However, exploitation and oppression do not appear only in the economic sphere; they are also perpetuated in the domain of social, cultural, and moral values that support a conservative logic of the role of women in class society. This constitutes part of what we call patriarchy, which structures the social relations in society. The organisation, division, and hierarchy of work – as well as social, political, and cultural elements within families, the State, civil society, and social reproduction itself – help to maintain this status and are intertwined with other issues such as class and race.

The way in which the capitalist economy organises and structures the labour of men and women in society must be understood as the sexual division of labour. This structure of work not only divides tasks between men and women; it also creates a hierarchy that attributes a greater value to men's work than women's work. This structure promotes the separation between production and reproduction and only considers labour in the productive sphere of the economy to be 'work' – a space mainly occupied by men. Meanwhile, it separates the space for reproduction, care, family, domestic tasks, which becomes 'non-work' or barely recognised work and is (mostly) unpaid and often socially devalued.



According to Oxfam, poorly paid jobs are mainly occupied by women. They account for more than 75% of all unpaid care work in the world. Women and girls dedicate roughly 12.5 billion hours to unpaid work every day, either as caregivers for the elderly or taking care of the home (Oxfam 2020). As a result, 42% of women in the world are excluded from the labour market (compared to only 6% of men who are outside of the labour market), mainly due to the overload of domestic work.

This huge gap is based on a misogynist and defective economic system, which places women at the centre of the debate on the current crisis of capitalism. Women are the first to feel the effects of this crisis, which leads to the precarisation of their jobs and to lower wages. The breakdown of crucial social assistance systems such as the social security system, the education of children (day care), and the care of the elderly, which have been exacerbated by the most recent neoliberal advance, also imposes an additional burden on the ‘care economy’, which is largely maintained by women. Moreover, violence against women has become normalized in a world in which more than 90,000 women are victims of femicide every year, with most cases occurring in their own homes in situations of domestic violence.

Resistance and Struggle

Neoliberal policy fractures society and fragments the political field, which makes it difficult to build unified resistance. At this juncture, any alternative to the reactionary neoliberal dispensation and to the populist political upsurge is seen as impossible; any other road – such as a socialist one – is made invisible. In this context of invisibility, it is especially important to remember the historic actions of emancipatory movements and to highlight the legacy of the current popular mobilisations of resistance that have taken place, from India to Chile.

Facing brutal oppression and violence, women – as the first and hardest hit by the economic exploitation driven by the crisis of capitalism – continue to be at the forefront of the growing social upheaval across the globe today. They have remained firmly at the centre of social struggles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where they have attended these protests in large numbers.

In this inaugural publication, we are particularly interested in highlighting the progressive, feminist, and mass resistance processes in the Global South and in identifying the key characteristics of the struggles of our time, inspired by the legacy of women in struggle throughout the 20th century.



Women in Struggle in Latin America in Times of Conservatism

In Latin America, the turn to the right occurred both through elections and through institutional coups of various kinds. This return of the right wing has meant the acceleration of the neoliberal project in the region. In the 1980s and 1990s, the countries of Latin America – especially Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela – adopted the neoliberal structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF); these included major cuts in public spending on education, health, and social assistance, as well as the privatisation of key public services. After a period of respite when the left was in ascendancy, the conservative phase has re-established itself and immediately turned to austerity, increasing exploitation and deepening precariousness for women both at home and at work.

At the same time, there has been a growing conservative reaction in the region. Right-wing organisations and religious groups have launched attacks against public policies that favour women and LGBT+ people, which include eliminating any mention of the word ‘gender’ in the school curriculum and limiting legal access to abortion. The right has driven a relentless campaign through social media and corporate media

against what it calls ‘gender ideology’. Though this tendency has been stronger in Central America and in Peru, it is present across Latin America and threatens to undermine the achievements won through decades of struggle.

Having experienced conditions such as cuts in the care economy and campaigns against women’s rights has led to the radicalisation of women, prompting them to mobilise and join progressive organisations in different parts of the world. More women are demanding a new model that centres a feminist vision in the struggle to build a different world. This demand for a new world comes out of the experiences in struggle against the patriarchal structural adjustment policies.

The capitalist tendencies and this neoliberal wave have deepened the effects of the sexual division of labour, gender violence, and oppression, as well as the rampant exploitation of women. This has, in turn, accelerated the organisation of working women, including indigenous, black, and landless women, who have taken an anti-neoliberal or even socialist turn, as is the case in Venezuela.

The gender violence and oppression experienced by women is manifested through the expansion of State restrictions on sexuality and on the reproductive capacity of women (as theorised by Silva Federici).



This attempt by the State to control female bodies has triggered protests by women's organisations around the world, as has been the case in Argentina, where women are fighting for the legalisation of abortion, taking to the streets en masse with symbolic green handkerchiefs in hand.

In Bolivia, women are at the centre of the protests against the 2019 coup against Evo Morales and the Movement to Socialism (MAS). Since the coup, the ruling government has humiliated and persecuted indigenous people as well as the entire peasant population. Together with the call for the restoration of their government, the women's protests, which are socialist in orientation, include the call for the emancipation of women and the indigenous peoples.

In Brazil, women mobilised in large numbers after the coup against the Workers' Party government. The famous *Ele Não* ('Not Him') march in September 2018 was the largest demonstration in Brazil's history; thousands of women and men marched through the streets of more than 114 cities in the country against the growth of misogyny and the election campaign of the ultra-conservative candidate Jair Bolsonaro.

In 2019, under Bolsonaro's presidency, repression, authoritarianism, and moral conservatism increased – with rates of violence against women skyrocketing.



Across Brazil, hundreds of millions of women, militants, and social movements say #EleNÃO - #NotHim - to then-candidate of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro in the largest women's march in the country's history, 29 September 2018.
Sâmia Bomfim / Wikimedia

In the first half of Bolsonaro's first year in government, cases of femicide increased by 44% in the country's largest city (São Paulo) compared to the previous year. In a country where a woman is beaten every four seconds, investment in public policies to combat violence against women fell from R\$ 119 million (reais) in 2015 – still under the Workers Party government – to R\$ 5.3 million in 2019 – with Bolsonaro in power. The Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights decreased the budget for assistance to women in situations of violence from R\$ 34.7 million to R\$ 194,700 in the same period. Investment in day care and pre-schools has also drastically decreased and is currently the lowest it has been in the last decade; the budget for the construction of new day cares and preschools fell from more than R\$ 506 million in the first half of 2014 to only R\$ 10.2 million in the same period of 2019. This increase in neglect and budgetary cuts that directly affect the lives and working conditions of women has been accompanied by a process of the expansion of political, social, and cultural conservatism and authoritarianism and will require a new level of resistance and organisation of women in the country.

In Chile, the feminist struggle has grown considerably in recent years. This was evident in the March 8 International Women's Day struggle of 2019, which – while it is often a very large demonstration – grew exponentially in size. Besides its size, the women's

movement consolidated its organisational power with the creation of the Feminist Coordination of 8M, which – along with other organisations – held the Second Plurinational Meeting of Women in Struggles in January 2020. More than three thousand women and LGBT+ people met to discuss the programme and plan an exit from the current scenario.

During the uprising that began on 18 October 2019 and still continues, Chilean women have taken to the streets to fight for a structural transformation of their country. They have faced brutal repression by the police and the military, which – led by the government of Sebastián Piñera – have blindly defended the interests of capital and its political representatives. During the protests and the repression, sexual violence by the police has been amongst the egregious and systematic human rights violations. The feminist movement made this violence visible with the performance of the collective *Las Tesis* and their chant, ‘The Rapist is You’; this performance has been echoed across the world in a range of languages.

The feminist movement in Chile works in solidarity with other social and political movements that reject the precariousness of life that has been imposed since the dictatorship led by Augusto Pinochet and continues to be maintained today. One of the main struggles in Chile has been the defence of the constitutional



process that fights to overcome neoliberalism and to guarantee the people's right to political participation. Part of this struggle is to advance gender parity in the constitutional process.

In Venezuela, as pointed out by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Ana Maldonado, Pilar Troya Fernández, and Vijay Prashad in an open letter, the majority of those who defend the Bolivarian Revolution are women. As part of the revolutionary process in Venezuela, women have been essential in the role of rebuilding social structures eroded by decades of capitalist austerity. Their work has been crucial in the development of popular power and the creation of participatory democracy. Sixty-four percent of the spokespersons in the 3,186 communes are women, as are most of the leaders of the 48,160 communal councils and 65% of the leadership of the Local Supply and Production Committees (CLAP). Women demand not only equality in the workplace but also in the social sphere, where communes are the atoms of Bolivarian socialism. Women in the social sphere have been striving to build the possibility of self-governance and dual power, slowly eroding the structure of the neoliberal state.

The current processes of struggle and resistance in Latin America must centre women and their demands in their analyses and debates on how to build a new world.

The Situation of Women in India Under the Modi Regime

Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's election in 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its family of Hindutva organizations have sharply escalated the spread of a pervasive rhetoric of hatred towards minorities and progressive forces. Through this campaign of hatred, the right-wing forces have sought to tear up the fabric of Indian society and refashion it to suit their divisive ideology. Not only is there a threat of violence hanging over anyone who stands in opposition to this project; there is also a cloud of generalized violence that has settled over society. The horrific part is that the right-wing groups and lynch mobs enjoy impunity. Women are the most affected in this atmosphere of violence in the country.

Since 2014, there has been a visible rise in violence against women – particularly sexual violence – across India, instilling fear and cultivating anger in women throughout the country. This year, it has perhaps been the most visible in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). UP is the epicentre of the BJP's communal politics, whose underlying agenda is to divide society along the lines of religion, caste, etc. It is the state where the Chief Minister Yogi Aditya Nath, a 'man of god' turned BJP



leader, is bent on establishing his own version of the Hindu Rajya ('Hindu State'), using state machinery to intimidate Muslims and devert them of their citizenship rights. Since Aditya Nath assumed the office of Chief Minister in Uttar Pradesh, crimes against women have increased by 33% according to the government's own admission in the state legislature. The terrible ordeal of a young woman who was sexually assaulted by a BJP member of the legislative assembly (MLA) is symptomatic of the brutalities inflicted on women under the rule of the BJP. When the young woman dared to report this MLA to the police, her father was tortured in police custody, resulting in his death. When she persisted with her legal fight, a truck suspiciously rammed into a car in which she was traveling with family members and her lawyer; two of her family members were killed in the incident, and she and her lawyer were gravely injured.

When women have asserted their rights, the Hindutva forces have vehemently and violently opposed them. After years of women activists demanding entry into the famous Sabarimala temple of Kerala, in 2019 the Supreme Court of India held that women have the right to enter the temple. The BJP's national leaders and central ministers decried the rights of menstruating women to enter the holy temple, which in their view pollutes the temple. Yet, when the Left Democratic



The Women's Wall in Kerala was a mobilisation of 5.5 million women in defense of gender equality and Kerala's renaissance values, and against right-wing attacks. The wall covered 620 kilometres from the north to the south of the state, 1 January 2019.

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Front government in Kerala implemented this right, the BJP and other right-wing organisations mobilized violent mobs to attack the women who visited the temple and went on a rampage across the state against women's right to enter the Sabarimala temple.

At the core of the BJP's ideology is Hindutva patriarchy that subordinates women and upholds the caste system. A woman, as per the BJP's ideology is portrayed as a mother, Bharat Mata ('Mother India'), who symbolises the national honour. The repeated myth that Bharat Mata is under threat from its internal enemies, that is Muslims, is used to polarize the society along religious identities and for political mobilization. The BJP's inclusion of women is not a result of the dismantling of patriarchal norms or structures or by challenging patriarchy, but on the terms of Hindutva ideology and within the framework of Hindu Rashtra'. The BJP's parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), places women in the role of bearers of chastity and as symbols of honour in the community. The RSS has promoted a wave of religiosity through temples and Bhajan ('devotional song') groups among women – with an emphasis on superstition and rituals. Through these groups, the Hindutva right-wing is mobilizing the labour force and has accelerated the far-right's mobilization of women against their own interests. Over the course of several decades, there has been a drastic fall in the participation of women in the

labour force among working-age women, which stands at 23% today according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data in July 2017- July 2018.

There is a false argument given by many right-wingers that women are staying at home instead of finding employment solely because men earn more. But there are other factors at play, as well, such as the fall in agricultural employment, due in large part to mechanization (among other reasons), which was a main source of employment for rural women. While men have tried to find work in urban areas through seasonal and long-term migration, this process has been tougher on women, for whom the responsibilities of childcare are infinitely more taxing when they are forced to move away from their communities. The reality that women are most often the primary caretakers for their families in turn makes finding suitable employment especially difficult for them. Away from their communities, it is difficult for women to find safe workplaces. In the case of women whose families have migrated with them, or who were already living in urban areas, the costly and time-consuming commute – which is a reality for the urban working class – poses an additional challenge who often bear the sole responsibility for childcare, cooking, cleaning, and other housework.

The BJP government has done nothing to improve working conditions for women in terms of policies



such as equal wages, implementing creches at the workplace, or guaranteeing safe and harassment-free working places. Instead, its efforts have been geared towards turning the clock back and whittling away at the freedoms that women have won through decades of struggle, turning them once more in to upholders of religious honour and identity.

However, the severe and continuous assaults on women and their rights have been met with a massive wave of resistance across the country. Women are leading the ongoing movement against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the National Population Register (NPR), which fundamentally violate the provisions of the Indian Constitution. From Delhi's Shaheen Bagh to various small towns, cities, districts, and villages, women are at the forefront of the movement against the BJP-led attack on the right to citizenship.

Resistance and Struggle in South Africa Since Apartheid

In South Africa, women have played a central role in struggles – notably in the fight against apartheid. The Federation of South African Women was launched in Johannesburg on 17 April 1954. It adopted a Women's

Charter that placed the emancipation of women at the centre of the struggle for a just future. A few years later, Dorothy Nyembe and Florence Mkhize emerged as key leaders in the insurrectionary resistance in the Cato Manor shack settlement in Durban in 1959. Following the Durban strikes in 1973 and the rebirth of the black trade union movement, women like Jabu Ndlovu and Emma Mashinini became important protagonists in the union movement. Women continued to play a vital role in the community-based struggles that came to the fore, often under the banner of the United Democratic Front, in the 1980s.

An influential strand of white academic feminism tended to argue that women's participation in struggles enmeshed with the broader struggle for national liberation should not be counted as fully feminist. Nomboniso Gasa, a courageous anti-apartheid activist and major feminist intellectual, offered a powerful argument against this view in 2007, asking "Why the Berlin Wall between blackness and liberation struggle on the one hand and feminism on the other?" This debate has now been resolved with regard to history. Women who participated in struggles that linked questions of race, gender, and class are no longer excluded from the count of who is a real feminist.

But after apartheid, as part of the general process by which NGO-based 'civil society' came to replace



popular organisations, feminism frequently became a profession, primarily located in NGOs and the academy. Grassroots, or popular, feminism was seldom recognised as feminism – even when it took on insurgent forms. The focus of this kind of professional feminism was often on changing laws and policies and achieving representation in elite structures. There were, of course, important exceptions, including the work done in and around the Treatment Action Campaign in the late 1990s and early 2000s – a struggle for access to medication that included a significant focus on popular political empowerment. In 2009, the limits of professionalised feminism came to the fore with the ascent of the deeply patriarchal Jacob Zuma to the presidency. Zuma came to power with significant popular support both from the left and organised women in the African National Congress (ANC) as well as from the electorate. Feminist advances in terms of policy, law, and elite representation had not been matched by advances in building popular power and shaping the common sense of society.

Today South Africa suffers terrifying rates of violence, including sexual violence, against women. Opposition to this crisis has sometimes taken the form of demanding the return of the death penalty, the suspension of the rule of law, or demands that men should ‘protect’ women. Popular feminisms, which are flourishing in some quarters, continue to be ignored in the elite



Domestic workers gather at Church Square in Pretoria, South Africa to begin their march to the Union Buildings in protest against unfair labour practices and low wages, June 2019.

Ihsaan Haffejee / New Frame

public sphere and in the bulk of the academy and NGOs. However, not all struggles in South Africa have been co-opted by the ‘NGOization’ of social struggles; in this sense, Abahlali baseMjondolo is a key example of a contemporary instance of popular feminism. Abahlali baseMjondolo is a squatters’ movement that has become the largest social movement to have emerged since the end of apartheid; the movement has a majority of female members and many women in leadership positions and often raises feminist issues cast in the language of the political empowerment of women.

Unlike countries such as Brazil, or India, South Africa does not have the kind of sustained and national women’s movement that connects university-trained intellectuals and professionals – such as lawyers and journalists – to women active in community organisations, social movements, and trade unions. Building such a connection is an urgent priority, not only in South Africa, but for the whole continent and in solidarity with the other countries of the Global South.

Creativity, Strength, Solidarity

In opposition to austerity and capitalism in all parts of the world, women have shown their creativity, strength, and solidarity – not only against neoliberal policies and the increase of conservatism, but also in favour of socialist experiments. It is essential to promote international solidarity considering the similarity of these processes and the various alternatives that are being created by women.

What is clear from these examples is not only that women participate in these struggles, but that they take leadership positions in them. It is this participation and leadership that guarantee the inclusion of a socialist feminist perspective in the revolutionary process.



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