

Women Resist the Unholy Union of Patriarchy and Capitalism in South Asia: The Fourth Asia Newsletter

– This Newsletter is by Elizabeth Alexander

As we celebrated another International Working Women's Day, an assessment of the status of women and where we stand in terms of our goal for a gender equal world is pertinent. In a time when the neoliberal forces are dishonouring the history of the women's day, appropriating it for corporate gain and making it a token celebration high on symbolism in collaboration with patriarchy, we need to turn to the women's movements around us and remind ourselves of the reality. This newsletter tries to look at some of the economic and socio-cultural challenges among women in some of parts of South Asia. Also, we talk about the interventions women's movements have made to fight the societal norms that seek to control the progress of women.

One would hope that after more than a century of the International Women's Day, we are closer to our goal for an equal world. But, thanks to the unholy nexus between capitalism and patriarchy, we are still fighting for basic rights that by now should have been a common practice of the society. Women have for long been fighting against the discrimination in employment, constantly seeking economic justice. The social and cultural components that perpetuate gender-based violence make this fight for economic justice even more challenging. Every day we witness the onslaughts of regressive forces on women from across the world in one form or the other.



Varunika Saraf (India), Jugni, 2020.

From India, even in this 21st century, we hear reports of violence against women in the name of ‘witch

killings'. According to the National Crimes Records Bureau of India (NCRB), over 2,500 women have been killed on charges of witchcraft since 2000. A staggering **75,000** women face the threat of violence and ostracism as a result of being labelled 'daayan' (witch). It does not end there. Numerous reports have been piling up about the increase in the number of dis-**honour killings** in the country. The same goes for the case of domestic violence and **marital rape**. The legal system and the laws that are supposed to safeguard these women often fail to offer protection and redressal. On many occasions, the state seems to even go to the extent of protecting the culprits from being persecuted. This is the case not just in India.

From Turkey we hear reports on the alarming number of femicides and of the increasing cases of violence against women and girl children. With the withdrawal of the country in 2021 from the Istanbul Convention, a treaty that requires the governments to adopt legislations prosecuting violence against women, femicides and domestic violence has become more **rampant**. With the state resorting to religion instead of taking into consideration the **need for tightening legal framework**, life and safety of the women in Turkey are under threat.



Lala Rukh (Pakistan), Masawi Huqooq, 1983.

Similar distressing accounts of violence against women and girl children are heard from Pakistan as well. Pakistani rights activists estimate that around **1,000** women are killed every year in the name of honour. Child marriage and child labour are again matters of concern in the country. Owing to these reasons, coupled with economic conditions, over 6 million children of primary school age and 13 million children of secondary school age are out of school in the country. Here again, the failure of the state in making legislations aimed at the welfare of women and children needs to be highlighted.

While the Pakistani government fails to facilitate the education of girl children, not that far away, Afghan girl children face outright denial of the right to education

When the neoliberal ideology with the tacit support from conservative practices prevalent in different religions state has vested interests in the subjugation of women through maintenance of patriarchal control, it is unlikely that we see any meaningful legislative interventions aimed at ending the violence and unequal status of women. Any deviation from the status quo of heteronormative family norms (often based on caste or ethnic groups) threatens the system that ensure the free labour of women in the daily and generational reproduction of the laboring masses. To make sure that does not happen, for the ruling class, control over women's bodies is necessary. By extension, it also makes women's bodies objects of family and community 'honour,' deriving from the age-old idea that women are properties of men.

When the state fails to offer equal rights to its people, history is witness to the rise of mass movements that have the power to overthrow even the most authoritarian regimes. The women's movements across these countries offer hope of a better tomorrow. In Pakistan, at **Aurat March** (Women's March) every year, women take to the streets their demand for safety from endemic violence, accessible health care in a nation where nearly half of women are malnourished, and the basic economic justice of safe working environments and equal opportunities for women. In Turkey, organisations like **'We Will Stop Women Murders'** are part of a strong movement against all forms of violence against women.



Nalini Malani (India), *Medea as Mutant*, 1996.

In India, the **All India Democratic Women's Association** (AIDWA) along with several others share a long history of militant struggle against different forms of violence and oppression of women. They have been fighting for economic justice as well as against caste based oppression in a country like India, where class and caste are often intertwined. Their politics have been rooted in the understanding that a true transformation to a gender equal world, an improvement in the material conditions, especially of the working class and backward castes, is inevitable.

Even the recent series of protests by **Accredited Social Health Activists** (ASHA workers) in the country, organised by left-leaning trade unions, demanding an increase in the honorarium brings to the fore the significance of otherwise invisible care work that women are expected to perform in the maintenance of the economy. While in the formal economy care work is fairly compensated (especially in the healthcare industry), the ASHA workers who are expected to perform a **range of duties** as agents of the state, are paid between Rs 5000 – 15,000 (different across Indian states). They are not recognised as workers but are labelled health activists and deprived of being beneficiaries of the minimum wage legislations guaranteed to all workers. Recognising the significance of care and domestic labour of women and offering them fair compensation is critical to the integrated struggle for gender justice.



Arpita Singh (India), *Fifteen Clouds Three Flower*, 2006.

Women's movements against economic and cultural oppression come in all shapes and forms. It can be radical like the **4B movement** that emerged in South Korea advocating the rejection of marriage, childbirth, dating and sex with men. It may also come in the form of **Gulabi Gang**, the women's vigilante group in northern India that fights against domestic violence. It could also entail the consistent fights against wage gap and demand for safe workspace by women across the world. Even everyday defiance of the neoliberal forces and patriarchy, big or small, builds into the resistance against the unequal world we live in.

The demand for dignity in both the public and private sphere continues to be at the centre of the very non-linear progression of our movements. The slogan 'Bread and Roses, etched in the history of International

Working Women's Day, continues to resonate with the women's struggles even today. To finish off, I would recommend you all to read **this dossier** that documents how some countries in the global south are putting up resistance to "the neocolonial, capitalist, and patriarchal power of hyper-imperialism."

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