

Women's struggles in the Asia Pacific region

Wednesday 4 July 2007, by [MACDONALD Lisa](#) (Date first published: 12 April 1998).

This talk was presented to the Asia Pacific Solidarity Conference by Lisa Macdonald, a national executive member of the Democratic Socialist Party.

Taken together, the diverse presentations and discussions at this conference have painted a remarkably vivid picture of the impact of imperialism on the lives of the people of our region.

Whether it is the destruction of the environment of the Pacific by imperialist powers' nuclear weapons testing or greenhouse gas emissions; the occupation of East Timor by the Indonesian regime backed by Australian imperialism; or the oppression and exploitation of working people and indigenous people by local capitalists in every country under the direction of the IMF; session after session has testified to the human rights abuses that have accompanied the tighter integration of Asia and the Pacific into the world capitalist system.

The dispossession, exploitation and further impoverishment of masses of people that integration brought to Asia and the Pacific has escalated over the last two and a half decades as the neo-liberal policies of a capitalist system which is running out of markets, natural resources and sources of super-profits have been imposed around the world.

The attacks on ordinary people's living conditions that have accompanied the imperialists' efforts to extract more and more profits from the neo-colonial populations, and from their own populations, are now being magnified by the current economic crisis in Asia.

Millions more people are losing their jobs, are no longer able to afford food and other necessities, are being forced on to the streets, and are being expelled from countries where, until recently, they were welcomed as highly exploitable **guest'' labourers**. **Where people are resisting the sackings and price rises, repression by the state has been swift and severe.** Colonialism and the integration of all countries in the region into the capitalist world economy brought particular forms and degrees of exploitation and oppression for women. Even before the neo-liberal onslaught, women were at the bottom of the heap of the poor, homeless, jobless, enslaved and exploited. Then during the late '70s, '80s and '90s, as the transnational corporations imposed **their free trade zones''** and agreements, and as the austerity policies demanded by the IMF and World Bank were implemented, the attacks on working people's standard of living, hit women especially hard.

According to the World Health Organisation, the increasing Third World debt and the IMF and World Bank's structural adjustment programs are the single greatest factor in the deterioration of women's health and well-being.

Women, especially peasant and indigenous women who are forced off their land by capitalism's plundering of natural resources, have become the new **flexible'' labour force in the urban centres** – more often than not unemployed, and when they do get work, un-unionised, unprotected and increasingly exploited. Women in Indonesia, for

example, are pushed out of the countryside by golf-course developments and into the sweatshops of Nike where they work for 12 hours a day for a minimum wage of \$2. When they protest their exploitation, they are sacked. When they organise against it they are attacked and imprisoned. Women in East Timor are, every day, raped, murdered and forcibly sterilised by the occupying army of Indonesia, an army that is trained and supported by Australian imperialism. The women of Burma, Thailand, India and most other countries in Asia are sold or stolen into slavery, trafficked like so many kilos of drugs. Women in the Philippines sell their bodies to rich tourists to escape a life of destitution in the burgeoning slums of Manila. The average age of a female prostitute there is now estimated at 14. Those who manage to escape to Australia as mail-order brides face a probability of being killed by their husbands that is six times greater than other Australian women.

Women in China are bearing the brunt of the restoration of capitalism there. Unemployment, which is increasing at a phenomenal rate as China's new capitalists drive to eradicate the most uneconomic labour, is concentrated among women. The privatisation of farm land and the pressure on parents to put their children to work in the fields rather than send them to school means that female children's education is sacrificed first. The current Asian economic crisis will make these conditions for women in our region much worse. That crisis is, in a very immediate and deep-going way, a crisis for women. The escalating levels of exploitation and oppression of women that accompanies neo-liberalism is not restricted to the neo-colonial countries of Asia and the Pacific. Despite all the international women's conferences, the feminist networking and lobbying, the UN conventions and progressive government statements, and the growing numbers of women heading government bureaucracies and NGOs, for the overwhelming majority of women around the world, things are getting worse now. A few examples tell the story: According to Amnesty International, women are increasingly at risk of rape and other human rights abuses because of the growing number of local wars. The World Health Organisation reports that between 20-50% of the world's women are physically abused. In Australia, one in four women is sexually abused before she reaches 18 years old. As unemployment and poverty escalate everywhere, so does domestic violence. Some 100 million women are now missing due to infanticide and nutritional neglect of girls. A WHO report released just last Wednesday shows that the rate of women dying in childbirth is rising again in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. AIDS is now the biggest killer of women of child-bearing age, not only in Africa but in the African-American population of the US. Within the imperialist countries, many of the advances that were made by the women's movement of the 1970s and early '80s are being rapidly eroded. In Australia, despite equal pay legislation, the gap between average women's wages and those of men is growing again for the first time since the 1970s. Child-care is being priced out of reach for many women. The proportion of women workers who are unionised is declining. And there is a powerful backlash being waged against feminist ideas. Single mothers, indigenous women, immigrant women, full-time working mothers – all are being targeted by the conservative opinion makers, softened up for slaughter in the next government budget or piece of legislation to increase the profitability of big business. In the absence of an organised, unified mobilised women's movement in this country, this backlash is winning a lot of ground. Last year, the Department of Social

Security received more than 4000 calls from people, encouraged by government's rhetoric about welfare bludgers, dobbing in so-called welfare cheats. The majority of those dobbled in were single mothers. Public support for women's right to choose abortion is also waning. In 1991, 81% of Australians favoured freedom of choice, but by 1996 this had dropped to 77%. Most alarmingly, a 1995 poll found that only 51% of 14 to 24-year-olds supported choice. As the attacks increase, the differentiation of women – into the minority who are born into wealth or have managed to take advantage of the opportunities that the earlier women's movement opened up to make successful careers for themselves in business, politics, academia or government bureaucracies, and the majority of women, whose plight is worsening, becomes clearer every day. In Australia, as elsewhere in the region, that majority is growing. It includes non-English speaking background women immigrants, whose job prospects are limited to the sweatshops or doing outwork for Katies, Country Road, Jag, Sportsgirl or any of the more than 40 Australian fashion companies using outworkers. It includes the growing numbers of women who have to work but can't get a secure job with decent pay, let alone with maternity leave or sick leave, and who must now also bear more of the burden of care of sick and elderly relatives as the government cuts health and aged care spending. It includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who are having their, already extremely limited, land rights abolished altogether, and whose life expectancy, already 20 years less than non-indigenous women, is declining further in relation to other women and men. It includes the 35% of women up to 24 years old who are unemployed (the highest jobless rate of any groups) and whose opportunities for education are being slashed by the re-introduction of the user-pays system. The deteriorating life conditions for the majority of women in both the First and Third Worlds in a period of history which, following the independence movements in the colonial countries and the equal rights movements in the imperialist countries was supposed to be characterised by development', widening opportunities and equality, is slowly but surely exposing the limitations, indeed the dead end of the reformist approach to women's liberation.

The debate that has been waged for more than a two decades in progressive movements about how best to achieve equality and justice for women is becoming starker and the stakes in the outcome are getting higher.

On the one hand are those feminists who argue that the main task is to strengthen feminists' influence or intervening in existing structures of government to bring about reforms for women.

This strategy of lobbying politicians and governments more effectively, or better still, getting more feminists into positions of power in the public and private sectors, is based on the idea that gender equality can be made from the top by reforming the status quo, if feminists can just get up there. It frames the work of many women's NGOs, parties, caucuses and networks in our region and the world.

While they have the same aims — equality for women — feminists from the left of the movement argue that women cannot rely on or fundamentally reform from within the existing systems of law and government in women's interests.

Women's oppression, we argue, is intrinsic to capitalism which is organised — from its smallest repressive unit (the family) to its largest (the state) in order to maintain and perpetuate women's

oppression.

While the struggle for legal reforms is crucial, it is primarily as a means to a very different end. Socialist feminists point out that the living conditions of most women are deteriorating because the basic building blocks of gender inequality remain intact.

Tinkering around the edges of those building blocks will help some women for some of the time, but, as we are seeing today, reforms are all too easily taken back, even reversed.

Today, when the most urgent task is not even to campaign for more reforms, but, under the onslaught of neo-liberalism, to maintain those we thought we had won decisively decades ago, it is becoming clearer every day that if all women are to be liberated, we must work towards dismantling those building blocks completely.

Such a perspective is — in fact must be if it is to succeed — profoundly democratic. Worldwide experience has shown over and over again that women cannot depend on others — neither those in positions of power whom we lobby, nor the individual feminists we help elevate into such positions — to make the sort of fundamental changes needed to liberate all women.

Women — the majority of women — have to make their own liberation for themselves. That means building a mass, participatory movement which learns from its mistakes, which is politically independent and therefore free to make whatever alliances will advance its struggle, and which, in the process, educates and empowers women so that they have the confidence to take on every bastion and manifestation of sexism.

This perspective is also profoundly collectivist. It rejects both the search for the individual solutions of post-modernism or “Do It Yourself” feminism, as well as the reformist perspective of the social democratic career feminists who say they will do it FOR us in parliament or in their pro-capitalist political parties or the femocracies these parties set up to appear to be responding to women’s demands. Both paths are real options only for a minority of well-off, well-educated, white women.

In the end, the struggle for women’s liberation is a struggle to change a system which serves the interests of and is ruthlessly protected by a tiny but extremely well-organised and well-resourced ruling class.

Our most powerful weapon in that struggle is our numbers: masses of women united, organised and mobilised to demand change cannot be easily ignored or beaten.

The mobilisation of large numbers of women from diverse backgrounds in uncompromising struggle for their various demands (equal pay and better working conditions; more government funded child-care, education, aged care and health care; free abortion on demand; land rights for indigenous people, and so on, and the linking of these struggles into a mass movement, will inevitably pose the need for a total re-organisation of society in the interests of the majority. It can’t do anything but that.

In this context, socialist feminism is profoundly internationalist. It recognises that the source of women’s oppression is, in this era of imperialism, a world system and must therefore be fought internationally. Through capitalism, the struggles of women for justice in one country are inextricably linked to those in every other country.

This understanding is particularly important for those of us in imperialist countries.

It’s not just that as indirect beneficiaries of the spoils of imperialism in the region Australian

feminists are generally better resourced than those in the Third World and have a moral duty to support their struggles. It is that without the serious solidarity of women in Australia — a solidarity which is not just information exchange and moral and financial support but, most importantly, which campaigns successfully against the Labor and Coalition governments' policies of rape and pillage in the region - the struggles for liberation by women in the neo-colonial countries cannot succeed.

In the process of giving that sort of international solidarity, the movement for women's liberation in Australia will also be strengthened. That's the task of feminists in Australia today.