

Sri Lanka: Economic crisis and women's unpaid labour

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Academic, rights activist, and Member of Parliament Dr. Harini Amarasuriya delivered the keynote address at the Regional Conference on Equality and Equity in Recognising Unpaid Care Work and Women's Labour in South Asia on 20-21 October, organised by the Women and Media Collective and Social Scientists' Association.

Following is the address:

This conference could not be held at a more important time. Sri Lanka is going through one of its worst economic crises - possibly the worst it's experienced - and social reproduction work such as child care, maintaining households, and community relations are becoming increasingly difficult. Not only is this work being done primarily by women - whether paid or unpaid - but it is becoming harder and harder to do. This is not simply an economic crisis - but a social crisis of mammoth proportions and one that was a long time in the making.

In my talk today, I would like to propose that this social crisis - especially the crisis in social reproductive work - calls for an interrogation of feminism's relationship with capitalism, especially neoliberal capitalism, and also that it provides us with an opportunity which we should not miss, to reshape the future in radically different terms. The more time I spend on policy work, the more I realise that there is a startling consistency - and for me an increasingly uncomfortable consistency - in what counts as 'women's issues' and the policy and other interventions that are proposed to deal with those issues.

Deteriorating economic conditions on the one hand and the need to increase women's labour force participation rates (apparently not high enough) on the other, topped off by microfinance lending programmes for poor women, lack of women's representation in decision-making bodies, and therefore a lack of empowerment programmes and quotas to ensure equality is occasionally disrupted by talks of the need to ensure meritocracy so that only women who deserve to be in these positions get there, because if not, there is the shame of having 'unqualified' women in positions of power.

Gender-based violence in homes, workplaces, and the community must be combated by law reforms. In general, there is very little recognition of how these very institutions that are expected to deliver equality and justice are themselves the sources of exclusion, oppression, and exploitation, especially of women from minority communities and low-income groups.

The role of social reproductive work

But more alarming is that there is very little space or debate on the conditions that produce disadvantages and difficulties for women. For instance, how deteriorating economic and living conditions are linked to high rates of inflation, weakened social protection systems, and exploitative work conditions including lack of living wages; the resurgence of ethnoreligious nationalisms and its

impact on maintaining myths, superstitions, and gendered stereotypes; and how increasingly difficult family and personal dynamics are linked to things such as economic precarity, political unrest, and status anxiety, especially among men, and how it contributes to increased violence in the home as well as in public spaces.

There is also very little recognition in policy spaces about the importance of social reproductive work and how it supplies some of the most essential pre-conditions for the maintenance and survival of human society. Or most importantly, in my view, how the invisibility and exploitation of social reproductive work - both paid and unpaid - is part of the economic and social crisis we are facing, and if we go into the heart of the matter, the means through which capitalism has sought to manage these crises.

This is why this conference and the deliberations taking place here are so important. As pointed out by Nancy Fraser in an article titled 'Contradictions of Capital and Care,' the strains on care work, on social reproduction work - whether paid or unpaid - are not accidental. Rather, it is deeply rooted in the structures of neoliberal capitalism and neoliberal society. She describes it as the social reproductive contradiction in capitalism. That is, although social reproduction is essential for sustained capital accumulation, capitalism also destabilises the processes of social reproduction.

I quote: 'Non-waged social reproductive activity is necessary to the existence of waged work, the accumulation of surplus value and the functioning of capitalism as such. None of those things could exist in the absence of housework, child-rearing, schooling, effective care, and a host of other activities which serve to produce new generations of workers and replenish existing ones, as well as to maintain social bonds and shared understandings. Social reproduction is an indispensable background condition for the possibility of economic production in a capitalist society.'

So yes, the production, sustenance, and maintenance of human subjects are essential for the capitalist economy whether childbirth, child care, the socialisation of the young, maintaining households, care of the old, maintaining social bonds, or reproducing societal values and traditions. All of this and more is essential work for the production and sustenance of human subjects.

In capitalist economies, this work receives no monetised value and is considered free. Described as care work, this is primarily regarded as women's work. Gendered stereotypes promote this notion of care work as a natural extension of women's inherent impulse for nurturing and care. Increasingly, ideas about successful women are about women who are able to efficiently - while dressed in saree and high heels - manage care work plus a career while also keeping a husband happy. It's called 'work-life balance' and I understand there are workshops that tell you how you can do all this.

Please note, that in all of this there is a very strong class element to how women are talked about. None of this takes into account the lives of daily wage workers, agricultural workers, factory workers, or those thousands of women trapped in microfinance lending schemes. Care work is then allocated to the 'private sphere' - homes, neighbourhoods, and informal networks, while public institutions and systems that support this work such as schools, health systems, and social protection mechanisms are slashed and weakened.

Rather than the idea of collective or social responsibility for care work, we have the idea of private and personal responsibility and personal failure when things don't work out. It's lack of time management or not being able to multitask efficiently, or not knowing/understanding financial management that causes failure - and so we have workshops to deal with that as well.

Capitalism and social reproductive work

What is disturbing about the responses to the inevitable crisis that these impossible and unrealistic expectations set up, is that these ideas of work-life balance, equal sharing of care work, and more insidiously, the off-loading of this work onto poorer, more vulnerable women – essentially relegating social reproductive labour to a subordinate position, is viewed as a feminist response or at the very least a gender-sensitive response to the crisis. When policymakers talk about gender, this is the narrative through which women's problems are discussed and how solutions are proposed.

At the same time, capitalism has also not shied away from using public institutions such as schools and health care services to fashion social reproductive work to produce the kinds of ideal subjects for its own purposes.

For example, like colonial educators attempting to produce 'docile, civilised, native women and men who could serve the colonial project', neoliberal education strives to produce the ideal neoliberal subject – aspirational, competitive, entrepreneurial, and imbued with a strong sense of personal responsibility.

Since this emphasis on personal responsibility in an increasingly competitive and precarious economic and social environment is inevitably accompanied by a high risk of failure and stress, the medicalising of emotions and reactions to suffering and distress has not only emerged as capitalism's answer to the social crisis we are experiencing but rather conveniently opened up huge markets and profits for the health sector, especially the pharmaceutical industry.

I remember working in the mental health and psychosocial sector almost 25 years ago and the biggest problem was the reluctance of people to access mental health and psychosocial services because of the stigma, but also because people simply did not articulate their problems in psychological terms. I no longer work in that sector, but I suspect it is vastly different today – if the popularity of courses on psychology is anything to go by.

Impact of the current crisis

However, the truth is that this sustained and combined assault on social reproduction has pushed families, communities, and especially women to a breaking point. Most families, communities, and individuals today are experiencing the economic and social crisis primarily as a crisis of care, or the breakdown of social reproductive functions.

As inflation places huge stresses on everything from food security to the provisioning of basic services such as education, health, and transport, as the value of wages plummets, as social protection measures are slashed, these are having profound consequences for families and households, for the wellbeing of people, for familial and social bonds that hold people together.

There is enough evidence too of how gender-based violence increases in such times of increased anxiety and political uncertainty. Unsurprisingly, the crisis of care is also then articulated as a moral crisis – of mothers not mothering properly, breakdown of family values, people moving away from religion and traditional values, etc.

Recently, in Parliament during a debate on nutrition, a Government MP suggested that the real problem was modern mothers not knowing the nutritional value of traditional foods – rather than picking and cooking nutritional vegetables from the home garden, she apparently feeds herself and her children kottu roti washed down with coke. This, apparently, is what is causing malnutrition.

The fact that what is being currently proposed as an answer to the economic crisis is further slashing of public institutions and increased taxes shows that there is absolutely no consideration of what that might do to the crisis of care. Ironically, the Government has placed a tax on social

protection while busily chipping away at all the mechanisms that actually provide social protection.

As dark and as terrible as these times are, we have a responsibility to make sure that struggles over social reproduction become central to the work that we do in transforming the future. No longer can we afford to relegate social reproductive work like paid and unpaid care work to the background. We cannot - and we must not - ignore the deliberate erasure of this work or its confinement to the private sphere, as inextricably linked to the very nature of exploitative, oppressive, and extractive neoliberal capitalist structures. We must recognise the class, gender, and ethnic elements of this expropriation of paid and unpaid care work.

This is where we need to be extremely mindful to ensure that our work doesn't lend itself to simply managing exploitation and oppression with empty promises of equality and empowerment that don't challenge and seek to transform the structures that produce and maintain exploitation and oppression.

Valuing care work cannot be reduced to the provisioning of daycare facilities and including unpaid care work in census data - useful as that is. We must ensure that feminism and feminist action are not appropriated by those in power to construct a veneer of equality and freedom (for a few) while maintaining those same structures of inequality and domination (for the majority).

A time for change

I believe this is a huge challenge for feminism in these times, because of the extent to which ideas of gender, equality, and women's issues are dominated by liberal discourse that inevitably masks power structures and systems of exploitation. We need to strengthen feminist critiques of the structures of exploitation, oppression, and domination and examine how predatory, especially financialised neoliberal capitalism, has weakened democratic spaces, social protection capacities, and living conditions.

We must reject attempts to devalue or ignore class and structural analysis of the crisis and efforts to steer the debate towards tired old concepts such as increasing women's participation in the workforce, legal reform, micro-credit, women's political participation, etc. which fundamentally ignore the sexism, patriarchy, racism, and oppressive nature of political, economic, and legal systems and institutions.

There is a moment here, an opportunity for us to push not merely reforms but for transformation - push for the possibility of seeing and organising society differently - a world where justice, equality, and freedom are the basis for organising society, where wealth and natural resources are shared by all, where the environment sustains humankind and is not simply a resource to be exploited, where caring, loving, and nurturing bonds are the pre-conditions of life.

We simply cannot any longer afford to sit on the fence, see both sides of the coin, make useless appeals for the oppressors and the exploited to come together, and expect those who created the problem to be part of the solution. This is not the time for any of that. Rather, this is the time for us to grasp with both hands - with all the energy, dynamism, and transformative potential that feminism offers - the opportunity to imagine and create a new world.

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