



Women and Media Collective together with the Social Scientists Association organized the regional conference on Equality and Equity in Recognising Unpaid Care Work and Women's Labour in South Asia on the 20th and 21st of October 2022. This document is the keynote address delivered by Academic, Rights Activist and Member of Parliament Dr. Harini Amarasuriya at the conference.

Thank you very much to the organisers of this conference for inviting me to deliver the key note speech today. It gives me great pleasure to be here with all of you, discussing an issue that is close to my heart –and also one that I am trying to learn more about.

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 its experienced – and social reproduction work – child care, maintaining households, community relations is 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 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 – 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 representation of women in decision making bodies – therefore empowerment programmes and quotas to ensure equality. This is occasionally disrupted by talks of the need to ensure meritocracy so that only women who deserve to be in this positions get there – because if not the shame of having 'unqualified' women in positions of power; Gender based violence in homes, workplaces and the community – to be combatted 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.

But more alarming is that there is very little space or debate on the conditions that produce disadvantage 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 ethno-religious nationalisms and its impact on maintaining myths, superstitions and gendered stereotypes; how increasingly difficult family and personal dynamics are linked to things such as economic precarity, political unrest, 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 – is 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: “Nonwaged 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, affective 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 is essential for the capitalist economy. Whether, child birth, child care, the socialisation of the young, maintaining households, care of the old, maintaining social bonds, 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 values 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 saris and high heels)

manage care work plus a career while also keeping a husband happy. Its 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 tapped in micro finance lending schemes. Care work is then allocated to the ‘private sphere’: homes, neighbourhoods, 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. Its lack of time management or not being able to multi-task efficiently, or not knowing/understanding financial management that causes failure – and so we have workshops to deal with that as well.

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 on to 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 policy makers 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 attempted 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 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.

However, the truth is, that this sustained and combined assault on social reproduction has pushed families, communities and especially women to breaking point. Most families, communities and individuals today are experiencing the economic and social crisis as primarily a crisis of care, of 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 plummet, as social protection measures are slashed – all of 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, 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, 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 day care facilities and including unpaid care work in census data – useful as that is. We must ensure that feminism and feminist action is 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).

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 mask 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 work force, 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 human kind and is not simply a resource to be exploited; where caring, loving and nurturing bonds are the pre-conditions of life. We simply cannot afford to sit on the fence any longer; see both sides of the coin; make useless appeals for the oppressors and the exploited to come together; to 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.

Thank you ■