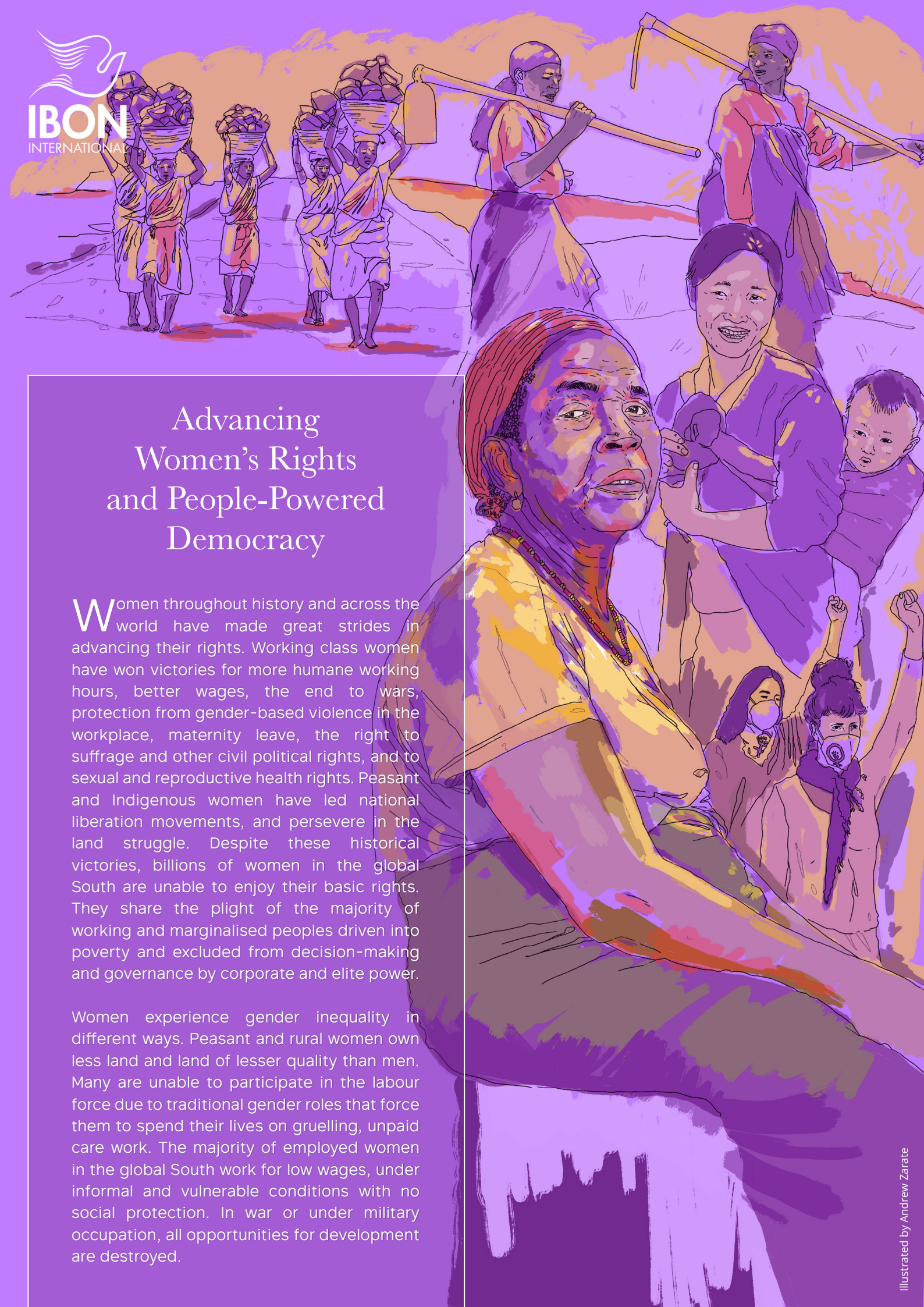
IBON INTERNATIONAL

Advancing Women's Rights and People-Powered Democracy

Women throughout history and across the world have made great strides in advancing their rights. Working class women have won victories for more humane working hours, better wages, the end to wars, protection from gender-based violence in the workplace, maternity leave, the right to suffrage and other civil political rights, and to sexual and reproductive health rights. Peasant and Indigenous women have led national liberation movements, and persevere in the land struggle. Despite these historical victories, billions of women in the global South are unable to enjoy their basic rights. They share the plight of the majority of working and marginalised peoples driven into poverty and excluded from decision-making and governance by corporate and elite power.

Women experience gender inequality in different ways. Peasant and rural women own less land and land of lesser quality than men. Many are unable to participate in the labour force due to traditional gender roles that force them to spend their lives on gruelling, unpaid care work. The majority of employed women in the global South work for low wages, under informal and vulnerable conditions with no social protection. In war or under military occupation, all opportunities for development are destroyed.



Illustrated by Andrew Zarate

On a global scale, underpaid, overworked women workers in the health and domestic sectors have carried humanity through the pandemic. At home, women have nursed the sick, cared for the elderly, and painstakingly strived to continue the education of children as schools were closed. UN data shows that the pandemic increased the total number of women and girls living in extreme poverty (USD 1.90 a day) to 435 million.[i] Even before the pandemic, women have been in dire poverty and have suffered from generational inequalities as big corporations continue to amass wealth.

In this paper, IBON International provides an analysis of women's systemic oppression, propose people-powered democracy as a framework for social transformation that would create conducive conditions for the advancement of women's rights and development, and highlight the vital role of women and their organisations in this process. We deem the advancement of women's rights as intrinsically linked with the struggle of working and marginalised peoples for system change. The empowerment of women and their organisations are integral to building a people-powered democracy.

1. Women's situation in the global South

In the current global economic order, productive resources and wealth are captured by transnational corporations (TNCs) and ultra-wealthy capital holders in the global North and the local ruling elite in the global South. Under monopoly capitalism, the majority of women are exploited, deprived of basic rights and social protection, and denied the right to development.

To maximise their profits, TNCs extract cheap raw materials from, and outsource the intensive, low-waged labour to the global South. Northern corporations and states export surplus capital in the form of foreign direct investments (FDI), portfolio investments, loans, aid, and others to extract more profits. These capital exports are invested in industries that will expand resource extraction and the international production networks captured by TNCs. Foreign aid is even used to purchase surplus products from the donor country (see section on *Quantity and quality issues in development finance for women*). Since the 1960s, according to a recent study, the global North has drained USD 152 trillion worth of resources from the global South through low wages and "unequal exchange" in international trade.[ii]

Monopoly capitalism has skewed Southern economies to depend on export commodities and surplus capital from the global North, instead of investing in local agricultural production and industrial capacities for domestic needs and national development. This unequal relationship between the global North and global South, historically established through colonisation, is perpetuated by the neoliberal policies (such as the liberalisation of trade and investments, privatisation of public services, labour market deregulation, fiscal austerity measures, among others) imposed by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank Group (WBG), and intergovernmental institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The makeup of Southern economies makes the majority of women in these societies either peasants or low-wage workers for foreign corporations and their value chains.

Box 1. Women's situation amid the pandemic

TNCs and the elite drive and even further profit from the pandemic and attendant crises. Pharmaceutical corporations have amassed profits from monopolising vaccine production and distribution even when vaccine research has been publicly funded.

According to Oxfam, the world's handful of billionaires have grown their total wealth by USD 5 trillion during the pandemic.[iii] The Pandora Papers uncovered the hidden wealth of public figures, including former and current world leaders and politicians.[iv] According to the OECD, USD 11.3 trillion of wealth are stashed in offshore accounts to evade tax and scrutiny.

Latest UN data states that due to the pandemic, 47 million more women and girls could be pushed into extreme poverty by 2021, increasing the total number of women and girls living in extreme poverty to 435 million.[vi] Women have faced income and job losses especially those in the agricultural, service, and informal sectors. For instance, global fashion brands which outsource production to factories in the global South, refused to pay for over USD 16 billion worth of goods.[vii] This affected the livelihood of millions of women who comprise 80% of garment workers globally.[viii]

Gutted social services due to decades of neoliberal policies reinforce gender inequalities. More women have left the workforce due to mounting care work responsibilities at home. They comprise 70% of health workers who are at the front line of the health crisis.

Violence against women (VAW) have risen during lockdowns. It was dubbed as the "shadow pandemic" by the UN Secretary General.[ix] VAW refers to "any act of gender-based violence (GBV) that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life."[x] States and their security forces have committed VAW and hindered women from accessing life-saving sexual and reproductive healthcare services. Peasant communities and the urban poor continued to face evictions by big landowners and real estate businesses. Women activists and their organisations who resisted the lockdown on rights, and called for health-based responses, faced state-sanctioned harassment, imprisonment, and VAW.

Peasant and rural women amid landlessness

Landlessness remains the major problem of peasant women in the global South. Land monopoly of the elite established by colonial powers remains firmly rooted. The "Green Revolution" endorsed by the US in Asia and Latin America in the 1950s,[1] followed by neoliberal policies, including market-assisted land reforms by the IMF and the WBG, have exacerbated land concentration to corporations and accelerated the integration of smallholder farmers to the corporate food system. Corporations and the liberalisation of private investment drive mega-infrastructure projects, but at great costs. Such projects that need huge tracts of land drive resource extraction, ecological destruction, and the displacement of peasant, rural and Indigenous women from their communities.

[1] In the 1950s, the US endorsed the "Green Revolution", which would supposedly transfer technology that would increase food production in the global South, in an attempt to thwart militant peasant movements demanding land reform and system change. The Green Revolution introduced high yielding varieties (HYVs) that required regular irrigation and fertilisers produced by TNCs to the global South. Poor farmers relied on credit to be able to afford the farming expenses for HYVs, and were forced to sell their lands to be able to pay off their debts. HYVs have degraded land and produce quality and diversity in the global South.

Box 2. **Global landlessness**

Seventy per cent of the world's farmlands are controlled by only 1% of landowners and are integrated into the corporate food system.[xi] Over 80% of farms are smallholdings of less than two hectares.[xii] The Land Matrix, an independent land monitoring initiative, has recorded 1,865 transnational deals covering 33 million hectares of land.[xiii] Most of the identified top target countries for land deals are in the global South, including Indonesia, Brazil, Papua New Guinea, Argentina, the Philippines, Ethiopia, Myanmar, South Sudan, Ghana, as well as Ukraine, and Russia.

Complex corporate and financial instruments used in land acquisition obscure the real state of land ownership and control, and make it difficult to seek corporate transparency and accountability. In a study of G20 states' large-scale land investments in the agricultural sector, less than 20% of land deals disclose the company operating the land.

Smallholder farmers comprise the majority of the world's farmers and produce one-third of the world's food[xiv], but only occupy 20% of arable lands.[xv] The majority of peasant women are smallholder farmers who till a small patch of land for their family's own sustenance, or pay rental as tenant farmers to big landowners. They are constantly threatened by displacement by corporate land grabs, whether for purely extractive activities or so-called development projects in partnership with governments. Other reasons for their displacement include conflict, climate change, and even climate change mitigation projects. Communities were not consulted in 90% of current land deals.[xvi]

Landlessness affects the livelihoods of an estimated 2.5 billion people in smallholder agriculture.[xvii] According to latest data from the World Bank, four of every five individuals living in extreme poverty reside in rural areas.[xviii]

In parts of the global South, unequal relations akin to feudal times persist between the local landed elite and farmers in rural communities. Farmers allocate a big portion of their harvest as rental to the local landed elite. In the absence of state support for agricultural production, the meagre income of farmers covers farming expenses including seeds, irrigation, fertiliser, pesticide, rent of farming animals for land cultivation, and basic farming machines such as tractors and threshers, among others. Farmers are forced to borrow at usurious rates to be able to afford farming expenses and make ends meet while waiting for harvest.

Unequal relations affecting peasant women are deepened by trade liberalisation, promoted by the WTO and other free trade agreements. Liberalisation has been behind the scaling back of support, subsidies, and protections for small farmers and food producers. It weakens local food production through reducing or removing tariffs for food imports, and weakened state regulation of trade and market prices.

Along with landlessness, peasant women also experience inequalities based on their gender. A study by the International Land Coalition (ILC) on gender-related land inequality shows that women own less land and land of lesser quality (i.e., less arable and fertile) than men.[xix] Women also have less access to

economic and political resources (e.g., decision-making power in various levels) in making land productive for their own needs. Legal and customary laws on land ownership discriminate against women.[xx] The same ILC study cited a case from Uganda that showed that women's marital status influences their rights to land. Land that women own through their relationships, such as through marriage, tend to be less secure.

In rural communities where feudal conditions persist, patriarchal culture privileges men and disempowers women in families. Traditionally, they may be excluded from decision-making in relation to land rights. The lack of social services also burdens women with care work and deprives them of other rights (see Box 3). Besides backbreaking farm work, peasant women are also largely responsible for the domestic labour required to maintain rural households and communities, including the fetching of water from distant water sources, preparation and cooking of food, cleaning, caring for children, the sick and elderly, among others. They are also expected to render domestic services to big landowners with little compensation or even for free. Rural women spend up to 14 hours a day on unpaid care work.[xxi] The heavy load of care work leaves women little time to participate in decision-making in their communities and other activities that could advance their rights.

Peasant and Indigenous women who assert land rights and defend their communities are targeted by state repression and violence. Global Witness recorded 227 land and environmental defenders killed in 2020, with the majority of victims in Nicaragua, Honduras, Colombia, Guatemala and the Philippines.[xxii] Over 1 in 10 of the defenders killed were women. In the first nine months of 2021, PAN-Asia Pacific has recorded at least 7 women who were killed, 16 jailed, and 5 threatened or harassed in land conflicts.[xxiii] Women land and environmental defenders experience physical, verbal and other forms of gender-based violence, including "smear campaigns that focus on their private lives, with explicit sexist or sexual content".[xxiv]

Women workers under neoliberal regimes

According to the International Labour Organisation, only 47% of women in the world are formally employed or are looking for employment, compared to 72% for men.[xxv] The gender gap in labour participation is higher than 50% in conflict-affected countries such as Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Palestine.[xxvi] Unpaid care work also consumes women's hours and hinders them from seeking or keeping paid employment. There are also fewer job opportunities for women.

Workers are generally not paid wages that are tantamount to the value that they create, but women are even paid 20% less in jobs where they do the same work as men.[xxvii] For instance, women workers in the Philippines are concentrated in short-term, vulnerable and low-paying jobs in the wholesale and retail trade and manufacturing sectors, and experience a 23% to 30% gender wage gap.[xxviii]

Box 3. **What runs the world? Women and girls' unpaid and underpaid care work**

Care work refers to daily tasks necessary to make individuals and societies functional. It includes food preparation and cooking, collecting water, cleaning the household, child-rearing, nursing the sick, caring for the elderly, among others. Traditional gender roles have made women largely responsible for care work. Women and girls "spend more than three times more hours on unpaid household and care work than men".[xxix] They do 12.5 billion hours of unpaid care work every day.[xxx] When valued at minimum wage, women and girls' care work would amount to USD 10.8 trillion a year.[xxxi] Working women's double burden of labour in the workplace and at home hinders them from joining organisations, and participating in decision-making at various levels.

Women are also overrepresented in the care and social sectors. They comprise over 70% of overworked and underpaid health workers, as well as domestic workers. Neoliberal regimes exacerbate women's care burdens and perpetuate gender inequalities. Feminist movements have advocated for the remuneration of women's care work in wages or by boosting state investments in social services.[xxxii]

The majority of employed women in the global South are exploited through low wages, under informal and vulnerable conditions with no social protection. They work in agribusinesses or for big landowners that supply agribusinesses, in factories based in special economic zones (SEZ), business process outsourcing (BPO) companies servicing foreign corporations, in the informal economy as street vendors, domestic workers, workers in family-owned businesses, among others.

Seventy per cent of women in non-agricultural jobs in the global South are informally employed (without job security, or a formal, employer-employee relationship).[xxxiii] Informal employment is even higher in South Asia (over 80%) and sub-Saharan Africa (over 74%).[xxxiv] Women migrant workers, the majority of whom are in the health, care, and services sectors, face similar vulnerable working conditions.[xxxv] Especially during the pandemic, corporations in digital platforms have also exploited informal, low-waged labour (see Box 4). This shows the failure of Southern economies to provide secure jobs to women.

Neoliberal policies, primarily attuned to the ease of doing big business, have created incentives for corporations while eroding labour regulations, therefore entrenching miserable working conditions. Women working under informal arrangements are forced to work with lesser pay, or work overtime with little or no pay. They are not granted health or leave benefits. Employers often have no accountability for work-related accidents, sickness, and other health issues. Pregnant working mothers are especially vulnerable with around 60% of women having no right to maternity leave, and almost 66% deprived of paid maternity leave.[xxxvi] Corporations can also easily lay off informal workers even without cause for termination and without severance pay. Without the formal employer-employee relationship, seeking corporate accountability for rights violations and abuse is challenging for workers.

Special economic zones (SEZ) illustrate how neoliberal policies and development models have reversed advances in working women's rights and worsened their living conditions. SEZs are "demarcated geographic areas…where the rules of business are different from those that prevail in the national territory"[xxxvii] and include "free zones, export processing zones [EPZs], and industrial parks".[xxxviii] These zones claim to create employment, promote industrialisation and economic growth by incentivising FDIs. Many zones have "fail[ed] to attract significant investment or to generate economic impact beyond their confines," yet hundreds are expected to open in the coming years adding to existing 5,383 SEZs in 147 economies in the world.[xxxix]

In developing countries, women workers comprise 50% to 90% of employment in SEZs,[xl] especially in light industries such as garments, electronics, and textiles.[xli] The "feminisation" of SEZ production was driven by a gendered race to the bottom, contrary to claimed benefits of these zones. Studies on women in SEZs cite the "gender wage gap, rising international competition, and gender norms" that "assign women to low-skill and low-paying work," founded on assumptions that women are docile and less likely to organise for higher wages and better working conditions.[xlii]

Generally, workers in SEZs labour for lower than minimum wage rates, and in substandard and repressive conditions.[xliii] They are discouraged and even barred from joining unions.[xliv xlv] According to a 2017 ILO report, "reports of violations of freedom of association in EPZs are common" and "legal restrictions on union rights in EPZs are widespread in developing countries."[xlvi]

Box 4. **Women and work in "digital platforms:" The case of the Philippines**

Digital labour platforms, such as online shopping, delivery services, and freelancing platforms, also exploit informal women workers and worsen their labour conditions. Since 2010, digital labour platforms have increased fivefold.[xlvii] The pandemic has also made remote-working arrangements common, forcing more workers into jobs in digital platforms as delivery riders or online shopping packers.

Seventy percent of USD 52 billion revenues generated by digital labour platforms were concentrated in the US and China in 2019, while big technology companies exploit low wage labour in the global South. Half of online platform workers earn less than 2 USD per hour.[xlviii] Workers in developing countries earn 60% less than their counterparts in developed countries. Online platforms eat into workers' meagre wages by charging higher commission fees to them than to clients. They also struggle with irregular work and income, a lack of social protection, and barriers to their rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining.

In the Philippines, popular e-shopping platforms Lazada, owned by the Chinese multinational tech company (MNC) Alibaba, and Shopee, a Singaporean MNC tech company, are reliant on the exploitation of subcontracted women workers and additional on-call workers during shopping sales to pack shopping deliveries.[xlix] A woman worker said that she was paid as low as PHP 32 daily (USD 0.60) or only 6% of the PHP 537 (USD 10) daily minimum wage in the Philippine capital when she began packing toiletries and other household items for these companies. Workers have to labour for 16 hours to reach the daily quota of PHP 5,000 (around USD 90) worth of deliveries. They are not paid for overtime work and usually earn PHP 100 to 300 (around USD 2-6) daily.

Online platforms have "further blur[red] the clear distinction between employees and the self-employed."[l] Those whose employment are "mediated through a platform"[li] are considered self-employed and do not have employee benefits. Workers find it difficult to negotiate working conditions as job recruitment and evaluation are algorithm-based, and are "unilaterally determined" by a platform's terms of service agreements. Workers are forced to accept a platform's terms to be able to access the job. Those who have fewer digital resources and capacities are prone to discrimination as well. Since most digital jobs are remote work and focus on individual tasks, workers have less opportunities to organise themselves to be able to fight for their rights.

The Global Rights Index reports by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) showed that violations of workers' rights by corporations and governments have steadily increased since 2014.[lii] In 2022, 87% of 148 countries reviewed by the ITUC have violated workers' right to strike.[liii] The majority have violated other rights including to collective bargaining, to establish and join a union, and to access to justice. Trade unionists were subjected to arbitrary arrests and detentions or even murdered.

Eight of the ten worst countries for workers' rights in 2022 were from the global South: Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Egypt, Eswatini, Guatemala, Myanmar, and the Philippines. In many Southern countries where labour laws have been eroded, women workers are also susceptible to violations of civil-political rights. GBV is perpetrated against women workers to enforce control and to repress their rights.

In Bangladesh, forming and joining unions in the women-dominated garment sector – the country's largest industry – are often met with "employer threats, physical violence and mass dismissals."[liv] In Mexico, bosses in factories in export processing zones inflict GBV against women to force them to work longer hours or at a faster rate and to discourage them from organising. In Honduras, a recent study showed that 59% of women in non-union banana packing plants experienced sexual harassment and other forms of GBV.[lvi] Unions, women's organisations, and civil society continue to call on states to ratify Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) and its accompanying Recommendation (No. 206) adopted by the International Labour Organisation in 2019 to recognise women's and people's right "to a world of work free from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence and harassment".[lvii]

2. Violence against women (VAW) through militarism and state repression

The US and other powerful states such as the UK, countries in Western Europe, Russia, China and Japan, use wars and occupation to facilitate corporate resource extraction or for geopolitical interests. These are also covertly pursued through military interventions and support to repressive states on pretexts of "peace and security", "counterinsurgency", and "counterterrorism."

Despite calls for global ceasefire during the pandemic, global military spending rose by 2.6 percent to USD 1.9 trillion in 2020,[lviii] and to over USD 2 trillion in 2021.[lix] This is projected to increase in 2022 amid the escalating conflict in Ukraine. The US leads the world in military spending, followed by China, India, the United Kingdom and Russia. The five countries altogether accounted for 62% of global spending.[lx] Monopoly capitalist countries also extract profits from the export of weapons and arms. The world's 100 biggest arms companies increased profits during pandemic, raking in USD 531 billion in profits in 2020.[lxi] The US also continues to dominate the arms industry with over USD 285 billion in sales accounting for 54% of total arms sales.

War and military occupation violate women's fundamental human right to life and destroy all societal foundations for the exercise of basic human rights. In contexts of conflict, people are killed, driven away from their homes, and separated from their families. Livelihoods, social infrastructure, and natural resources are destroyed. Sixty per cent of preventable maternal deaths occur in humanitarian crises or fragile settings, such as in Syria and Yemen.[lxii]

Box 5. **World military spending vs. women's rights**

The UN Secretary General's report on women and peace and security[lxiii] shows how military overspending fares in contrast with programmes for women:

- A fraction of world military spending (0.6% or USD 12 billion) could have provided modern contraceptive services for all women and girls in developing countries for a year.
- A CSO study showed that allocated funding for "gender-based violence (GBV) risk mitigation, prevention and response in humanitarian emergencies…only amounted to 0.12 per cent of the USD 41.5 billion spent on humanitarian aid between 2016 and 2018". USD 155.9 million would have covered the funding appeals for GBV responses in emergency contexts during the same years.
- In 2016, the total operating budget of 740 feminist civil society organisations worldwide was USD 106 million, less than the cost of one F-35 fighter plane.

Throughout history, sexual violence and rape against women have been institutionalised and legitimised by the state, especially in contexts of war and militarisation. During the Second World War, occupying Japanese military forces across Asia subjugated women to sexual slavery.[lxiv] The experiences of victimised women, dubbed as 'comfort women,' have been erased from history until efforts were made by women's organisations to document the stories of survivors in the late-20th century.

The US military has a historical role in facilitating the sex trafficking and prostitution of women and girls during the Second World War,[lxv] in Vietnam during the Indochina Wars, in military bases in South Korea, Japan, Thailand, the Philippines, as well as in Taiwan, and Hong Kong.[lxvi lxvii] Senior US military officers and personnel, in collaboration with the host state, authorised and regulated the trafficking and prostitution of impoverished women and girls to American soldiers.[lxviii] States have promoted the prostitution of women to "boost the morale"[lxix] or provide "comfort" to state forces in times of war, else, for contributions to economies.[lxx] Even after the removal of US military bases in the Philippines, sexual abuse continued under defense cooperation agreements. In 2014, Filipino transwoman Jennifer Laude was killed by US Marines Corp Joseph Scott Pemberton.[lxxi] The US Marine was deployed in the Philippines as part of defense cooperation agreements.

Corporations and the elite employ state forces to facilitate land and resource grabs and repress women's assertions for rights (see previous sections on *peasant and rural women* and *working women*). Front Line Defenders reported that women comprised 18% of the recorded 358 human rights defenders killed in 2021.[lxxii]

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and their organisations experience harassment, surveillance, arrests and detention on false charges, and gender-based violence. Counterinsurgency and counterterrorism laws have legitimised and escalated attacks against WHRDs, criminalising their work and clamping down on their rights through prolonged detention, travel bans, and asset freezes. Surveillance has also been conducted using digital technologies developed and imported by arms contractors, telecommunications, information technology, and surveillance companies based in large arms-exporting countries such as the US, UK, Switzerland and Germany.[lxxiii]

Patriarchal culture and VAW

Patriarchal culture perpetuates the unequal power between men and women. It violates women's autonomy and dignity, and perpetuates gender-based violence. Gender-based violence can be physical, sexual, economic, and psychological.[lxxiv] Women are prone to GBV within the family, in workplaces, public spaces, and even online. GBV is ingrained and legitimised in customary practices (e.g. honour-killing, female genital mutilation, child marriage) and laws.[lxxv] Hindering women's access to financial resources or their attendance to school or employment to maintain control over them are also forms of GBV. While VAW is globally recognised as a human rights issue, governments sideline and cut budgets for services that prevent and combat GBV. GBV is also institutionalised in the police who are supposed to be primary providers of essential services in response to GBV.[lxxvi]

Gender-based violence disempowers women, making them pliant in the service of capital and resigned to patriarchal gender norms, including domestic drudgery. It violates women's rights, and endangers their health and lives. UN statistics show that one in three women have experienced GBV in her lifetime.[lxxvii] Women who are excluded from economic and political participation have less access to protection and justice systems making them more susceptible to GBV.

Image by UNDP in Moldova https://flic.kr/p/9kCtUv (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

3. Grim prospects for development

Dominant state responses to the current economic, health, and climate crises are not conducive to women's development. Misaligned government priorities for debt servicing, corporate infrastructure projects, and military spending are at the expense of women's and girls' rights and exacerbate gender inequalities.

Impacts of debt and austerity

While local resources are exploited by TNCs, international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group have encouraged developing countries to rely on debt to finance their economies. IFIs' loans come with conditionalities that require countries to adopt pro-big business reforms that have widened inequalities and consolidated the monopoly of wealth. When debt becomes "unsustainable," IFIs recommend fiscal austerity measures, such as budget cuts on social services, indirect taxes on consumption goods, privatisation of social services and other public assets, among others, to supposedly free up government budgets and enable them to continue paying their debts. By implementing fiscal austerity, governments are able to "secure the confidence and approval of global capital markets and creditors."[lxxviii]

Austerity and gutted social services exacerbate women's precarity.[lxxix] An analysis of 779 IMF country reports in the 2010s showed the negative impacts of fiscal austerity, especially to low-income women and their households.[lxxx] As many women are currently employed in precarious work, earning less than their male counterparts, they tend to be more reliant on social protection programmes. Women workers who are overrepresented in public service sectors (e.g., healthcare) lose employment due to austerity. Budget cuts in social services make sexual and reproductive healthcare services (see Box 7) inaccessible, increasing maternal mortality, child and adolescent pregnancy.[lxxxi] It also impacts services that prevent and address gender-based violence.[lxxxii] Women's underpaid and unpaid care work, including in home-based healthcare and education, compensates for gaps in social services.

Box 6. **The IMF in Ecuador: Compromising health and women's rights**

In Ecuador, public healthcare was in dire straits even before the pandemic. Public health budgets were cut by 64% between 2017 and 2019. The government laid off 3,680 public health workers in 2019 due to measures recommended by the IMF.[lxxxiii] The lay-offs significantly affected women as beneficiaries of healthcare services, as well as women workers who comprise 60% of health workers and 85% of nurses in the country.

Ecuador's healthcare system was unable to meet public needs at the onset of the pandemic in 2020, and resulted in 20,000 more pandemic deaths than was expected. In the same year, maternal deaths in the country increased to 57.6 deaths per 100,000 compared to 37 deaths per 100,000 in 2019. Despite the need for stronger public healthcare amid the health crisis, the IMF has advised more austerity to 154 developing countries in 2021 and 159 in 2022. Such measures would affect approximately 85% of the world population in 2022, of whom 80% are in the global South.

Regressive taxation, such as indirect taxes on consumption goods, also affect low-income women who spend a larger portion of their income on basic goods. Women spend more of their time on additional waged labour to augment the household income. As traditional caretakers of the household and community, women put the welfare of their children, spouses, and other family members before themselves. If the household budget is insufficient, they even deprive themselves of food.

Amid the lack of job security and social protection programmes, low-income women resort to loans from predatory microcredit schemes especially in times of emergency.[lxxxiv] Women become trapped in private debt as microcredit lenders exploit women's situations and collect higher interest rates. In short, women pay both public and private debts with their wellbeing.

Box 7. **Women's sexual and reproductive health and rights**

Sexual and reproductive health and rights is a key component of women and girl's right to health. Realising women and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights ensures that they have access to information and services that will enable to them to make informed and autonomous decisions relating to their sexual relationships and reproduction. Reproductive healthcare includes family planning services, access to contraception, counselling and information, healthcare for pregnant women and infants, treatment for sexually transmitted diseases including human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), safe abortion services, among others.[lxxxv] Systemic barriers to reproductive healthcare including the lack of economic resources and access to healthcare services, and patriarchal cultural norms harm women and girls' health and wellbeing.

- Adolescent pregancy remains prevalent in developing countries due to poverty, lack of educational and employment opportunities, and patriarchal cultural norms.[lxxxvi] An estimated 21 million girls become pregnant every year, of which over 12 million girls (aged 19 and below) give birth. Childbirth complications are the leading cause of death among girls aged 15–19 years globally, with majority occurring in developing countries. Girls who experience adolescent pregnancy tend to drop out of school, suffer from social stigma, and become vulnerable to gender-based violence.
- 45% of induced abortions are unsafe, of which 97% occur in developing countries. In June 2022, the US Supreme Court overturned the landmark 1973 Roe v. Wade legal case which protected women's right to abortion in the country.[lxxxvii] The move was decried by women and concerned organisations across the world.[lxxxviii]
- Child and forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) are among harmful practices affecting women and girls.[lxxxix] In least developed countries 40% of girls are married before the age of 18. More than 200 million women and girls alive today have undergone FGM in 30 countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia.[xc]

Quantity and quality issues in development finance for women

Despite donor claims that "Official Development Assistance (ODA) for gender equality and women's empowerment is steadily increasing and is now at an historical high level,"[xci] latest available data show that the amount remains meagre. In 2018-2019, only 5% of total bilateral aid or USD 5.6 billion per year was allocated to "programmes dedicated to gender equality and women's empowerment as the principal objective."[xcii] According to the OECD, the UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls remains one of the least financed SDGs.[xciii]

In general, donor countries fail to deliver their 0.7% of gross national income ODA commitment to low- and middle-income countries. CSO estimates show that in 2020, fifty years since the commitment was made, donor countries have failed to deliver a total of USD 5.7 trillion in aid.[xciv] Moreover, huge amounts of development aid are tied to donor interests and do not even reach the global South. ODA flows "stay in the global North"[xcv] as donor countries contract their own domestic companies for the procurement of goods and services. This phenomenon is referred to as "tied aid." CSOs estimate that tied ODA in 2018 was worth USD 32.3 billion.[xcvi] In 2021, ODA figures have been inflated by in-donor refugee costs, in-excess vaccine donations, as well as debt relief.[xcvii]

There is also scant data that show how development finance is used by states to advance women's rights and development. A report by the Development Cooperation Forum[xcviii] shows that at the national level, there is "near-absence" of systems that would track allocations for gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as gender-disaggregated data on development cooperation results.[xcvix] ODA flows barely reach women's organisations. According to AWID, "between 2017-2018, women's rights organisations receive only 0.13% of the total ODA and 0.4% of all gender-related aid".[c]

Instead of urging developed countries to fulfil donor commitments, IFIs and intergovernmental organisations propose to further privatise public resources by enhancing the role of big private capital in development.[ci] For instance, blended finance is promoted as the "strategic use of development finance" to "mobilise" resources for sustainable development in developing countries. In reality, it encourages the big private sector to make investments on sustainable development by using public funds, including ODA, to subsidise private investments in development projects and guarantee "financial returns" or profits.[cii] A study by the UN Conference on Trade and Development showed that FDI that supposedly create job opportunities for women could contribute to gender inequality if these confine women to low-wage, informal jobs.[cii] [civ]

Gendered impacts of climate change

Nearly 20 million people are displaced from their homes every year due to rising weather extremes.[cv] Rich countries that have built their wealth through the plunder of the global South and fossil fuel-based development refuse to reduce their carbon emissions. IFIs and TNCs continue to invest in fossil fuels, as well as in resource extraction. Market-based, climate mitigation projects, such as the creation of carbon sinks, drive away peasant and Indigenous women from their lands. Global North countries fail to fulfil their climate finance commitments for climate mitigation and adaptation. Eighty per cent of climate finance are channelled as loans instead of grants, adding to poor countries' debt burdens amid the pandemic and attendant crises instead of helping their climate resilience.

Poor and marginalised women in the global South have contributed the least to global carbon emissions but they are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The livelihoods of peasant, Indigenous, and rural women depend on the environment and access to natural resources. Climate change and environmental degradation directly affect their ability to provide the daily needs of their families and communities. In the Philippines, a network of peasant women's organisations has observed "altered rain patterns…that disrupt planting seasons and adversely affect crop yields."[cvi]

Climate impacts exacerbate gender inequalities and gender-based violence.[cvii] As resources become scarce, rural women spend more time taking care of the daily needs of their families and communities, hindering them from economic and political participation. Shrinking natural resources make women prone to sexual abuse.[cviii] At least 80 case studies have shown increased "gender-based violence (including sexual exploitation)… in areas where environmental crimes and environmental degradation were taking place." These manifest in increased sexual abuse and trafficking in illegal extractive industries in various regions of the global South.[cix] While bearing the worse of climate change impacts, Southern women lack influence in climate policy arenas,[cx] and face challenges in accessing finance, technology and other resources for climate mitigation and adaptation.[cxi]

Women lead their households and communities in developing practices to cope with climate change and its impacts.[cxii] However, their capacities for climate responses are hampered by repressive laws. Peasant and Indigenous women who defend their communities from exploitation and who protect the environment through sustainable practices experience state-perpetrated, gender-based violence.


Image by Gideon Mendel for Action Aid/Corbis, gideonmendel.com

4. Women's struggle for rights and system change

Corporate and elite power undermine women's rights and development in the global South. To advance women's rights, it is imperative to address barriers to their access to productive resources and social services, and exclusion from development processes and governance. IBON International's People-Powered Democracy is a framework for social transformation that upholds people's rights and sovereignty by democratising ownership and control over productive resources and asserting the full participation of people and their organisations in development processes and governance. Building PPD with women and their organisations at the forefront of decision-making would create conditions for the advancement of women's rights.

PPD entails systemic shifts. Transforming Southern economies would require moving away from dependence on foreign capital and investment. It means reversing current neoliberal directions of IFIs and bilateral and multilateral trade and investment agreements that reinforce corporate monopoly and power, violate people's rights and sovereignty, and hinder national development. Southern economies should prioritise public and democratised planning for agricultural and industrial development to ensure food security, provide for domestic needs, and create secure jobs. In the short term, it is urgent to cancel the debts of developing countries to free up resources for national development needs.

Land redistribution and agricultural support are crucial to address the historical injustices against peasants, and would serve as the basis for rural development. Indigenous Peoples' rights to ancestral lands should be upheld. Peasant women and their organisations should be able to fully participate and lead the management of land and natural resources. Corporations and states should be held to account for rights violations against peasant and Indigenous women.

In the context of the climate crisis, it is important to support and develop community-based practices on sustainable consumption and production, and climate adaptation. Developed countries should uphold development and climate finance commitments. Reparations for colonial exploitation and climate-induced loss and damage should also be on the agenda.

Strengthening public services would ensure women's social security and ease their care burdens. Significant public investment is required in education, healthcare (including sexual and reproductive health), protection systems against gender-based violence, childcare, transportation, housing, public utilities (water, gas, electricity, telecommunications, internet), among others. Socialising care work would enable women's economic and political participation.

The democratic participation and leadership of women and their organisations in economic planning, decision-making and development processes at all levels (community, workplace, municipal, regional, state and international) would ensure that their perspectives and gender-specific needs are integrated in shaping policies and development paths.

Enabling conditions for women's economic and political participation would help transform harmful patriarchal cultural norms and power relations. Laws, policies and cultural practices that discriminate against women and girls, undermine women's rights and gender equality should be abolished. The role

of the military and police – of global powers and state forces – in perpetuating violence against women should be acknowledged and held to account. Accountability mechanisms at the national and international levels should be mobilised to exact legal responsibility from perpetrators and deliver justice and support.

Women workers' movements in various parts of the world fought for rights in the workplace, and resisted global powers' wars. Working women, from the Philippines, Indonesia, to India, oppose neoliberal policies. The same is the case for peasant women in the Philippines and India, while also working to transform feudal economic and gendered relations. Indigenous women in Kenya and the Philippines fight destructive projects and protect their livelihoods. Women in Burma, including ethnic nationalities, oppose the military junta and fight for civil-political rights and self-determination. Kurdish organisations link the women's struggle, with strong women's leadership in their organisations, with fighting global powers' wars and militarist aggression in West Asia. Women's movements in Argentina and other Latin American countries resist the neoliberal crisis, debt, and gender-based violence.

Women's historical and continuing roles in people's struggles show how they build people-powered democracy.

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