

AIDWA



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Editorial Communication

Dear comrades, friends and well-wishers,

Today is Labour Day, when we pay our homage to the labour of men and women which creates all social wealth. But living in these terrible times when human life itself seems to be of very little value, how can we expect that human labour will have the value and the dignity due to it? On one hand, those in power are quite unable to provide relief to people reeling under the second wave of the corona pandemic, allowing them to suffer and to die unattended; on the other hand, their numerical majority in the Parliament is being used to exploit the labour power of men and women through the most repressive laws we have known in independent India. They are also seeking to crush all dissent, launching an attack on the very federal character of our Republic and using, for the benefit of the corporate powers which control them, the dread excuse of the pandemic to withdraw whatever rights the people acquired through their struggles. For this purpose they have been seeking to corrupt all the democratic institutions of our country like the legislature, the judiciary, the media and the Election Commission. They have made governance synonymous with violent police and army action, encounters, scams and horse-trading.

For us, this darkest phase in the country's history since independence offers a critical challenge. For a long time, we have used all the more familiar forms of democratic campaign to mobilise women from all sections of society to rise up together and demand the implementation of their basic rights inscribed in the Constitution. Our predecessors succeeded in gaining social acceptance for the principles of gender equality and gender justice through sustained struggle. AIDWA ever since its foundation as an all-India body forty years back has been in the forefront of this struggle.

But in the present circumstances, when the very grounds on which we had campaigned are being as it were removed from under our feet, we must not remain paralysed, but must discover unfamiliar and indirect modes of campaign and

communicate with the masses so that we may sustain our living links with women at the grassroots, women who are suffering, but are unable to make their voices heard because of their fragmented condition. In this fortieth year of AIDWA's existence let us move forward taking lessons from our predecessors who, even before AIDWA formally came into being, anticipated the need for such an organization to develop and maintain vital links with the needs of women in our country at various levels.

Malini Bhattacharya, President, All India Democratic Women's Association

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Macabre Dance of Death

-Mariam Dhawale, General Secretary, AIDWA



India has rarely witnessed such a macabre dance of death since its independence. The second wave of the Covid pandemic has left thousands dead all over the country. Innumerable women and men have died gasping for oxygen, without ventilators, without medicines, without hospital beds. Crematoriums and cemeteries are overflowing as never before. There have been over 3.5 lakh Covid positive cases registered in India on April 25, 2021 – which is a shameful world record ever since the pandemic began. All these extremely shocking figures are expected to increase still further in the coming weeks.

It is by now crystal clear that the Modi-Shah-led BJP-RSS central government is squarely responsible for this colossal human tragedy. As early as January and as late as March 2021, when Corona cases were rising again, the prime minister and his health minister were gloating in national and international fora over India's supposed splendid victory over the Covid menace, and prophesying confidently that the endgame had begun. With these high-flown declarations coming from the very top, the entire government and the bureaucracy let its guard down. The result is, to quote T S Eliot – 'April is the cruellest month' - so far.

It is a measure of the sheer criminal culpability of the BJP central government that, a full one year and a quarter after the first Covid wave hit India, the country still has an acute shortage of life-giving oxygen, ventilators, medicines and hospital beds. This has been further compounded by the government's vaccine policy. It has lifted its hands off its responsibility to provide free and universal vaccines to its people.

Earlier central governments gave free and universal vaccines against smallpox and polio, and this led to the eradication of these dreaded diseases. But this government, even in the face of the death of over 2 lakh of its citizens due to Covid, is more interested in assuring super-profits to its corporates.

The Covid pandemic was massively aggravated by the Kumbh Mela in which lakhs congregated at Haridwar. The permission to hold the same was given by the BJP central government and its Uttarakhand regime. Thousands of those who attended the Kumbh tested Covid positive and thousands more who were untested became carriers of the dreaded virus all over India. Last year the same central government gave permission to the Tablighi Jamaat to hold a much smaller conclave in Delhi. But the same BJP-RSS and their IT cells then went into a communal overdrive. Why are they so deafeningly silent now about the Kumbh? Why are they so silent about the Modi-Shah mass rallies in West Bengal? It was only after the Left first stopped its mass rallies in the wake of the Covid upsurge that the others were forced to follow suit. But even here, the BJP and its prime minister and home minister were the last to stop.



The current pandemic revealed yet another stark fact. Capitalism makes vultures of human beings. It tries to squeeze profits even from dead bodies. The shameful black marketing of oxygen cylinders and Remdesivir medicine, the rapacious loot by private hospitals, the nauseating extortion by vaccine corporates, all hold a mirror to the inherent evils of capitalism.

This pandemic has led to increase in child marriages, thereby depriving children of their childhood. It has again pushed millions of people into bonded labour and desperate deprivation. Most of all, it has underlined as never before the urgency of revamping the public health system.

The LDF-governed state of Kerala has provided a silver lining to this dark cloud. While the Centre and most states were running short of oxygen, Kerala is not only self-sufficient in oxygen but is actually providing medical oxygen to neighbouring states of Tamilnadu, Karanataka, Goa and Lakshadweep. How could it do this? It reinvested in public sector undertakings to increase its production capacity from 50 litres per minute in April 2020 to 1,250 litres per minute in April 2021.

The state government also gave priority to the public health system, with the result that 95 per cent of those needing hospital treatment for Covid in Kerala have undergone such treatment in government hospitals free of cost. Free food kits are still being given to 88 lakh families so that no one goes hungry. The union health ministry has itself admitted that there is 100 per cent utilization of vaccines in Kerala, unlike other states. And, in stark contrast to the central government which went back on its word, Kerala was the first state to declare that vaccines would be given free to all people above the age of 18.

All of us, regardless of religion, caste, creed, language, age or gender, must join together to thoroughly expose and defeat the villains responsible for this unprecedented national calamity, and fight for a radical policy alternative that boldly declares: Another World is Possible! Another India is Possible!

Vimal Ranadive: A First Generation Leader of Working Women

-S. Punyavathi, Treasurer, AIDWA

At that age and in that society, when women were invisibly chained and only men had the prerogative to organise workers, for a woman to participate in trade unions from a position of leadership was unthinkable. Today the situation has changed somewhat with women almost in every state of India participating in and leading trade union struggles, prepared to undergo all privations on equal terms with the men in their organisations.



Vimal Ranadive was one of those early leaders whose relentless efforts and indomitable spirit helped to bring about this change. She was fondly called 'Vimal-di'. On 10 April we celebrate her birth anniversary. As I pen a few lines in her memory, my association with her moves in front of me like the reels of a film. She used to tell me, 'organise a convention, I will attend', 'organise a meeting, I will attend'; that meeting or convention need not be in a nearby state or city; it need not be a large gathering either; she was prepared to come to any nook and corner for any number of working women. The word "no" did not exist in her dictionary. I was surprised to read in her biography that at the age of seventy, she was to attend a women's convention of the Life Insurance Corporation of India; the convention was held on the 19th floor of the office and the lift was not working; she climbed on foot to the 19th floor!! Such was her determination.

'Women work equally with men at work places. Hence trade unions should not be organised for men alone. Special attention should be given to organise women as well in trade unions', these are the words of Com. B T Ranadive, one of the founders of CITU and Vimaldi's comrade and life-companion. Together with him, she saw that women having family responsibilities would not be able to attend meetings arranged at inconvenient times and would incur blame for it. Their simple answer to this problem was: 'organise meetings at a time convenient for women'. In its early days, hardly 10 to 20 members used to attend working women's conventions of CITU. But this did not deter Vimal Ranadive. She was persistent in her efforts to bring more women to join trade unions. In 1984, a working women's convention and a district women's conference of Visakhapatnam District was held. She travelled all the way by train; the meeting was attended by 50 women! She used to remember each and every member and enquire after them.

Com. Vimal started participating in movements at the early age of 12. She was arrested and put behind bars for 6 months for participating in the Freedom Movement at the age of 14. After her release, she continued her education. She worked as a teacher in order to support her family. She was born in a family with a left ideology; S G Sardesai, a prominent CPI leader was her brother. It was under his influence that she was attracted towards Communist ideology, joined Girni Kamgar Union, and organised them.

The Desai and the Ranadive families came close to each other because of their ideological affinities. BTR's sister Ahilya (Rangnekar) and Kusum were close friends of Vimal. All of them together worked for Girni Kamgar Union. The British government in those days put a ban on mill workers' strike. But a protest march of workers was organised defying the ban during the Naval Mutiny which started in Mumbai. Kamal Dhonde lost her life and Kusum sustained bullet injuries on her leg during this protest march.

BTR and Vimal got married while both of them were underground. Arrests, imprisonments or going underground were part and parcel of their lives. Participating in peoples' movements was the way of life with them; occasionally small employments were taken up by Vimal-di to support the family.

Vimal was very good-looking and acted in some films too. Women working in theatres and films were looked down upon in those days; to mitigate those ill feelings Vimal worked in films with full encouragement from BTR.

In subsequent years, she worked both for the Working Women's Coordination Committee of CITU and All India Democratic Women's Association. When CITU centre was functioning from Calcutta, she worked among tea, coffee, and rubber plantation workers. The first all India Working Women's Convention was held in 1979. She was its first all India convenor. In 1981 the All India Democratic Women's

Association was formed from a convention in Madras; she was elected its vice president. In 1989, the Anganvadi union was formed; she was its first vice president too.

She looked at women's' issues from the point of view of the working class and at working women's issues from the point of view of subjugation of women. It was her view that organisations of workers and of women should work in coordination. Even while she was taking up the responsibilities of CITU, she was supporting women's movements by working as AIDWA's vice president. She took an active part on many issues like dowry and rape laws, the Shah Bano case and was in the forefront of the movement to set up a National Commission for Women.

Excerpt from 'Women Workers of India'

by Vimal Ranadive, National Book Agency, 1975

Ordinance on Equal Wages for Equal Work

With great fanfare and publicity during the Emergency, an ordinance was promulgated by the President on 26th September 1975, banning any discrimination in wages against women workers. It said 'men and women workers doing the same work or work of a similar nature' will get equal pay. The ordinance also said that no employer shall pay any worker wages at rates lower than what he pays to workers of the opposite sex for performing the same work or work of a similar nature. The ordinance also provided that no employer shall discriminate against women at the time of recruitment. The employer has to keep the necessary register of recruitment etc. The provision has been made for punishment with fine which may extend to Rs. 5000/- No imprisonment for breaking these rules is prescribed. This ordinance is claimed to be a 'gift' to women in the International Women's Year, who had to wait for 27 years after Independence (!) and 17 years after the Government accepted the ILO convention relating to equal remuneration.

The proclamation of the ordinance is, in fact, a belated measure, which, though outwardly claims to abolish wage disparity between men and women, does not go much in ensuring the implementation of the measure and fails to protect women from the threat of retrenchment following its introduction.

The application of the ordinance will not lead to automatic introduction of equal wage for equal work for men and women. It depends on the notification of the industry by the Government within a period of three years and so far the Government has issued notification for plantation industry only. The planters have already represented to the Government to give them six months' time to study the implication of the ordinance with the result that women workers in this industry also continue to be deprived of equal wage rates.

The ordinance is applicable to establishments employing ten or more workers, and thus excludes large number of women workers in smaller establishments. It further keeps vague the definition of the clause 'same work or work of similar nature' so as to allow the employers to find out ways and means of evading the provisions of the ordinance. It also gives power to the Government to declare that in a particular establishment, the difference in wage rates between men and women is based on a factor other than sex which is likely to be used against women workers.

The ordinance does not ban retrenchment of women workers and thus refuses to

protect them when they face threat to their job security in the wake of implementation of the ordinance. Past experience shows that whenever protective legislation for women was passed, the employment of women dropped substantially. There is every possibility that instead of implementing the ordinance, the employers would prefer to throw out women workers on streets on some pretext. The provision of nominated advisory committees with 50% women representatives will alone not be able to stop these malpractices.

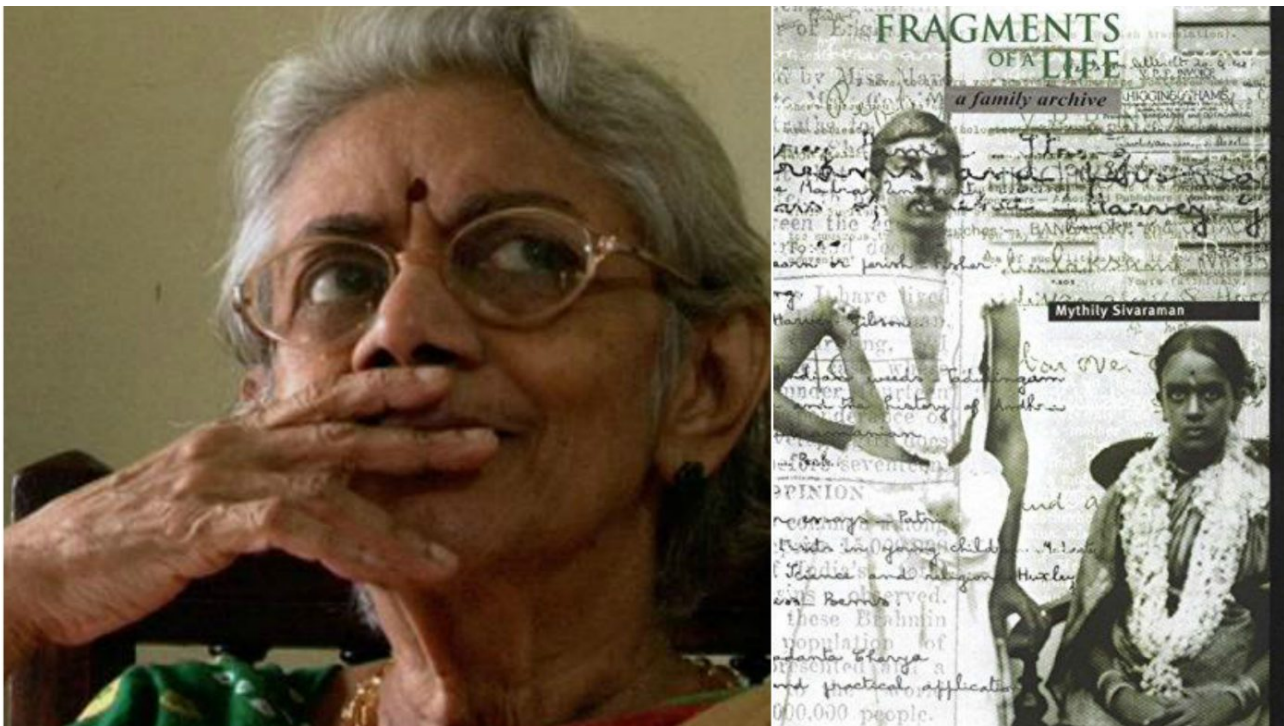
There is every likelihood that machinery of the State Governments will not be properly used and the employers will not abide by the ordinance with the result that there will be a curtailment of women workers in the industries.

Thus the women workers' struggle for equality in the matter of wages still continues even after the promulgation of the ordinance. The trade unions and women's movement should rise to the occasion and ensure through mass pressure that the concept of equal wages for equal work is brought into practice and use of women as cheap labour be stopped forthwith.

Under Capitalism

-Mythily Sivaraman, Former National Vice President of AIDWA and Working President of AIDWA, Tamilnadu Activist, author and creative campaigner

[This article was originally published under the name 'Towards Emancipation' in Social Scientist Vol.4, Nos.40-41 (November-December 1975) and later appeared in Mythily's book Haunted by Fire published by LeftWord Books in May, 2013.]



No one can deny that today even in the most industrialized societies of the West which abound in labour and time-saving gadgets, housework continues to be, as Lenin described graphically, 'barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery'. It is much worse in the underdeveloped countries for the masses of poor and middle-class women. Writing of the impact of industrial employment, Lenin said 'Large scale industry emancipates women and . . . broadens their outlook, makes them more cultured and independent' and 'it creates conditions of life that are incomparably superior to the patriarchal immobility of pre-capitalist relations'. Marx pointed out how the woman's re-entry into the productive process necessitated by the compulsions of capitalist growth despite the many ill-effects, was essentially progressive in freeing her from the 'house arrest.' Despite the extra burden that industrial employment imposed on the woman who became a 'double slave' it was the contact with the outer world that gave the domesticated woman the urge and the ability to rebel against her oppressed status. To quote Dalla Costa again:

To the extent that women were cut off from direct socialized production. . . they were deprived of social knowledge and social education. When women are deprived of wide experience of organizing and planning collectively industrial and other mass struggles, they are denied a basic source of education, the experience of social revolt. And this experience is primarily the experience of learning your own capacities, that is, your power, and the capacities, the power, of your class. Thus the isolation from which women have suffered has confirmed, to society and to themselves, the myth of female incapacity.¹

This is precisely the reason why capitalism, which has enough to contend with in a male worker, will not allow women in the labour market unless it needs labour power badly and even then will let them in only on its own terms.

The proposition that a woman can develop her human potential to the utmost and fulfill herself, not merely by performing her 'natural' role as mother and housewife but by involving herself in the continuous struggle of man to unravel the mysteries of nature and to tame it in the service of humanity, is not likely to go down well with most people, both men and women, here and elsewhere. Even the liberal reformers who have taken up the cause of improving the lot of Indian women workers have bemoaned the tragedy of the Grahlakshmi having to leave her cosy hearth under economic compulsions. The positive impact that work outside the home has on the woman's development is rarely ever recognized. The iron grip of obscurantism (religion, superstition, caste and a host of other irrationalities that set one man against another), which has been the special preserve of women, has begun to loosen up only under the offensive of industrial employment.

'WOMAN'S PLACE'

Even in the advanced industrialized countries the official ideologues on women are desperately busy building up the 'feminine mystique' and decrying the conditions that necessitate her to work outside the home. Now that the woman has had considerable experience in industrial and other kinds of work – the two world wars turned hundreds of thousands of 'home- makers' into welders and shipbuilders in the western world – and tasted economic freedom, equality and above all the sense of exhilaration that comes from comprehension and creativity, it is becoming increasingly difficult for official propaganda of the glories of motherhood to make much headway.

It is only when the woman once again becomes socially productive that she can gain an identity of her own and learn to define herself in relation to the larger

¹ Dalla Costa, 'Women and the Subversion of the Community', pp. 27–28.

society and not just her own family. The much glorified mother identity especially in feudal societies like India, where the common appellation for a woman is mother, is in fact only a camouflaged device to reinforce the all-exclusive mother image imposed on her by man and to deny her any other identity that transcends the four walls of her home. That it is precisely those societies where motherhood is almost deified that let their mothers kill their children by the dozen (to save them the agony of a cruel and slow death by starvation) is a testimony to the cruel contempt in which motherhood is in fact held.

It is largely true that the working women of the lower classes, although not really free from the impact of the ideology of the woman's inferiority, are still held in much greater respect by their men than are the genteel and frail upper-class housewives by their own men. The earning capacity of the former gives them economic independence, the lack of which has in large measure led to the secondary status of women in general. Comparing the 'hard-working woman of the barbarian era' with the 'lady of civilization, surrounded by sham homage and estranged from all real work,' Engels notes that the latter enjoyed much less social status than the former who was 'regarded among her people as a real lady and was as such by the nature of her position'.²

The lack of economic independence of women in our society is reflected in their much publicized docility, timidity and compliance. The negative base of so much of the chastity, virtue, and the proverbial toleration of the Hindu wife³ – financial dependence on the man – is bound to be brutally exposed with the mass entry of women into productive work. Although the starvation wages given to women workers today help shore up many a marriage, it does not detract from the general validity of the claim that economic independence will trigger off the woman's rebellion in the family.

MASS ENTRY INTO SOCIAL PRODUCTION

For woman to become once again a part of the social production process the first pre-requisite is to create adequate job opportunities, a task to which capitalism the world over has proved unfit. Most serious women's liberation movements have focused their attention on this crucial area. Apart from the traditional demands of the right to work and to equal pay, a third most important demand – the right to the same kinds of jobs – must be added. Otherwise, women will remain condemned to the lower rungs of social production. One requirement to make possible the large-

² Engels, Origin of Family, Private Property and State, p. 50.

³ The nauseating extent to which the Pativrita concept was developed in the Hindu epics is reflected in the story of Nalayini, who willingly carried her leprous husband on her shoulders to the house of his mistress.

scale entry of women into social production is the creation of communal kitchens, washing rooms, and kindergartens. These will drastically reduce the time that each mother has to spend on her children in the seclusion of her home by making all members of the community, men and women alike, share the work. Unless child-rearing and housekeeping cease to be individual and maternal burdens and become a social responsibility, the working woman merely becomes a double slave wearing herself out in the process.

The woman can now, more than ever, choose her pregnancies as she wills and can have legal and safe recourse to abortion in cases of unwanted pregnancies at least in some countries. Thanks to the availability of baby food and day-care centres she need not be tied to the baby too long. As a result, maternity need not be an insuperable obstacle to her career ambitions. This is not to deny that all these facilities are available only to the privileged few in most countries today. However, the fact remains that scientific advance (although not yet developed to the extent of creating an 'ecological revolution' with test-tube babies which alone, Firestone claims, would free the woman from the 'tyranny of reproduction')⁴ has made and can further make maternity and housekeeping less and less time-consuming and arduous. It is a pointer that the women's dilemma – a mother or a mechanic – need not be an insoluble one. With increasing sophistication in the production techniques such as automation and computerization, the traditional separation of jobs on the basis of sex and the 'man's superior strength and motor power' are becoming less relevant. Could it be a mere coincidence that full employment opportunities for women and socialization of domestic services to a large extent have occurred only in the socialist countries?

A viewpoint from the left which rejects the proposition that women's entry into social production will help liberate themselves is most powerfully expressed by the Italian writer Mariarosa Dalla Costa.⁵ Contradicting the generally held notion that housework is not socially productive and that it is 'personal service outside of capital' she argues that capitalism created not only the proletariat but also the housewife (of the working class) as the slave of a wage slave and an integral part of its productive organization. The housewife is productive for the capitalist organization in many ways. First, in bringing forth children, she produces a commodity, labour power, and thus directly contributes to unpaid labour time or surplus value! Secondly she performs a host of 'social services' which capitalist organization transforms into privatized activity which in turn frees the man for direct exploitation. The man is 'free to earn enough for a woman to reproduce him as

⁴ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, Paladin, 1970. Firestone, who believes that nature produced the fundamental inequality, makes the 'revolutionary demand' that woman be freed from the 'tyranny of reproduction by every means possible and the diffusion of the child rearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women', p. 193.

⁵ Dalla Costa, 'Women and the Subversion of the Community', pp. 33–49.

labour power.' Her social productivity is invisible because only the 'product of her labour,' the labourer, is visible. Having been taught by the ideology of 'the women's place' to be passive and to sublimate her frustrations, the housewife, says Dalla Costa, acts as a safety valve for the social tensions created by the capitalist organization. She keeps the man going, often acting as strike- breaker and providing an 'outlet for all the oppressions that men suffer in the world outside the home.' Thus, the man's own indignation and frustration caused by the injustices of the capitalist system are contained and softened by the family in which the woman plays the leading role as the pacifier.

Women's Struggles across the World

From setbacks to victories: The struggle for reproductive rights is a working class struggle

-Surangya, AIDWA, Delhi

“The debate is not over whether or not to abort, the truth is abortion exists, people have abortions. The debate is whether it could be legal, so that all can access it without putting their lives at risk, or whether it should continue being clandestine and for people to continue dying from it. That is the debate,” said Agostina Betes in an interview with *Peoples Dispatch* a day after a bill was passed in Argentina on December 30 last year legalizing abortion in the country. Betes is an activist in the Movimiento Popular La Dignidad and Frente Patria Grande, social movements in Argentina.

In recent times, there has been an intensification of struggles demanding reproductive rights. There have been victories and there have been setbacks. While in Argentina, a historic decade and a half long movement won abortion rights for the women and gender diverse people in the country, in Poland women have been mobilizing consistently and in face of massive repression against the ban on abortions.

The movement in Argentina

As the Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy (IVE) bill was being debated in the Argentine senate on December 30, tens of thousands of women held vigil outside, dressed in green, with their faces painted green — the green wave, as the movement for reproductive rights in Latin America is being called. When the approval of the bill was announced, a collective joy exploded among those present.

Before the passage of the bill, abortion was illegal, except for a ruling passed in 1921 which allowed for abortions to be performed in cases of rape and when the life of a pregnant woman is a risk. However, this did not mean abortions were restricted to only these clauses.

According to estimates by authorities, every year around 500,000 abortions are performed in unsafe and clandestine conditions in Argentina, resulting in nearly 40,000 women needing hospitalization after these procedures. Official data says since 1983, more than 3,000 women have died in the country from poorly performed abortions.



When the approval of the bill was announced, a collective joy exploded among those present.

The most affected by these unsafe, clandestine abortions are poor women. According to reports, more than one poor woman a day dies from a clandestine abortion as these are performed in poor sanitary conditions.

Even the exceptions that were present in the law, in cases of rape and risk to life, could be exploited by upper class women to gain access to safer conditions. None of these options have been available to those in lower classes.

This victory is therefore huge and historic, particularly for the economically and socially excluded who cannot access or afford the procedure, and for those who died trying to abort.

Moreover, the law is applicable to not only women, but to all gender identities which can get pregnant.

The bill was passed by the progressive government of President Alberto Fernández. On the other side, opposing it for decades were religious fundamentalists who are closely linked to the Latin American right wing — conservative forces which continue to advance and influence public policy.

In Poland, the struggle against the nexus between the right wing and religious fundamentalists is continuing

In Poland, these conservative forces are in power, and have thus managed to almost entirely ban abortions. Since 1993, abortions were only permissible in

Poland in cases of rape and incest, and where pregnancy poses a risk to the woman's health and fetal defects. A new court ruling passed in October last year has now banned abortions in cases of fetal defects.

Because of the already existing restrictions, Poland had one of the strictest legislations on abortion access in the region, forcing between 100,000 -150,000 women to travel abroad every year for the procedure.

Abortion had been legal in Poland under the Communist government. However, the government that came into power in 1989, led by Solidarność (Solidarity), entered into a "clientelist" exchange with the Church. During the 1980s, Solidarność had been opposing the Communist government, and the church acted as a key ally of the party. When Solidarność won power after the fall of communism, it repaid its debt by implementing policies in line with the conservative stance of the Church, including placing strict restrictions on accessing abortions.

Under the far-Right Law and Justice (PiS) Party which came into power in 2015, the government has passed many regressive laws attacking the rights of women, the LGBT community, and others, including a near total ban on abortions. The October judgment that placed these further restrictions has been criticized as another step towards transforming Poland as per the whims of the conservative sections of the country.

The international Right was also involved in the passage of the anti-abortion ruling in Poland. An investigation by Open Democracy revealed how 20 US Christian Right organisations spent at least \$280 million all over the world, with the largest sum being spent in Europe (\$90 million).

One of these groups is the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) which is led by Jay Sekulow, former US president Donald Trump's personal lawyer. Days before Poland's constitutional court passed the abortion ruling, ACLJ had submitted arguments in favour of the new restrictions.

Meanwhile, in the US...

Conservative lawmakers across the US are intent on passing restrictions which will pave the way for the overturning of the historic Roe v. Wade judgment of 1973, which protects women's right of choice and reproductive freedom.

In the past decade or so, there has been a surge in the laws restricting access to abortions. Between 2013 and 2019, around 275 abortion clinics closed down in the country. The pandemic has caused more to close their doors. As a result, women have to travel long distances to access a facility which offers abortion, and also wait for much longer to get the procedure done. This again impacts the working class

and other marginalized sections most as it would be the hardest for them to gather enough resources to access abortions under these new restrictions.

Now, with a conservative majority in the US Supreme Court, the threat of *Roe v. Wade* being reversed is larger than ever. This could plunge the country back to the days before the landmark ruling — for instance, a survey conducted in the 1960s found that among low income women in New York City, 80% of those who had gotten an abortion had attempted a dangerous, self-induced procedure. According to official data, by 1965, illegal abortions resulted in one-sixth of all pregnancy-related deaths in the country. The actual number of deaths is estimated to be much higher.



Protests in Poland against the country's constitutional court's anti-abortion ruling.

As the new anti-abortion court ruling in Poland was passed in October, widespread protests broke out across the country led by the National Women's Strike, along with other women's groups and progressive sections. These groups have denounced the judgment as a declaration of war on women. While these women are continuing their struggle, they are doing so in the face of death threats in an increasingly hostile and dangerous environment for women's rights.

Their demand, much like the demand of the activists in Argentina, the US, and elsewhere, is to keep religious ideology separate from what is a public health policy matter. Access to abortions is a question of public health, which is a people's right. These struggles are part of the people's demand to keep the church and state separate, and to keep matters of people's rights away from religious influence. It is

also a matter of choice, as these women and rights' groups emphasize — parenthood should be desired, not an obligation.

Across these struggles and developments, a pattern clearly emerges. As and when conservative forces are winning power, women's freedom and autonomy is declining. However, where progressive forces are returning, women's rights and freedoms are the foremost on the agenda. The battle for the right to abortion has also laid bare the fact that women's struggles are closely linked to class struggles.

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